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### Fusion Project Evaluation (2006-2009)

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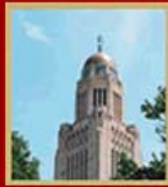
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## **Fusion Project Evaluation (2006-2009)**

September 2009

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The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center provides assistance to policymakers in all three branches of government and researchers on a wide range of public policy issues. The mission of the PPC is to actively inform public policy by facilitating, developing, and making available objective research and analyses of issues for elected and appointed officials; state and local agency staff; the public at large; and others who represent policy interests.

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	i
Introduction .....	1
Attainment of Goals .....	2
Major Themes.....	8
Research Design .....	10
Conclusion.....	11
Acknowledgements .....	13
References .....	14

## Executive Summary

The Fusion Project, funded through a grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), was a three year project in Lincoln, Nebraska targeting four refugee ethnic communities: African; Asian; Eastern European; and Middle Eastern. The project's goals were for:

- the refugee communities to work together to share and learn about developing vibrant ethnic communities;
- each refugee family to achieve self-sufficiency and social and civic integration into their new country and community; and
- Lincoln's mainstream community to be better equipped to work with refugees.

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center served as the project evaluator to assess Fusion's success in reaching the stated goals. Stories and perceptions of the project's activities and their impact were related by Fusion Project participants and served as the basis of the evaluation. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with project staff members and representatives of participating mainstream community organizations. Interviewees were asked about their experiences with the Fusion Project, the perceived impact of the project, what was successful, what wasn't as effective, and if they had suggestions for what might be done differently.

The following key findings emerged from the interviews:

- The structure of the Fusion teams and their working closely together promoted interactions among the staff members from various refugee groups, along with an interchange of knowledge regarding other refugee communities' needs and successes.
- Interactions among the four refugee communities did not increase in the same manner as among the Fusion staff members.
- The educational/social events and quarterly newsletters produced by the Fusion staff were very successful in helping refugees gain information about the Lincoln community and local organizations that serve refugees.
- The Fusion Project, in collaboration with a mainstream organization, was instrumental in helping refugees gain employment.
- Mainstream organizations were using Fusion as a resource to help the organizations better serve refugee communities.
- Interacting with individual refugees at educational/social events helped mainstream participants learn about the culture of the refugee community in attendance.
- All refugee communities are not the same; each group has unique needs and challenges.
- Mainstream organizations will better serve refugees if they take the culture and past experiences of each refugee group into account.
- Many staff members had more work to do than time to accomplish what was needed.
- Staff members gained valuable experience from their work on Fusion.

The findings of this project evaluation may be of use to other communities contemplating a similar project, as well as to the granting agency, Fusion staff, mainstream Lincoln organizations working with Fusion, and Lincoln refugee communities.

## **Introduction**

### Fusion Project Background

The Fusion Project began in October 2006 with a grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement to connect new refugees and their communities with local community resources in Lincoln, Nebraska. From 2006 through 2009, the project offices were located at the Asian Community and Cultural Center in Lincoln. Four refugee communities participated in the project: African, Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern.

### Fusion Project Goals

The staff (Director, Coordinators, and Liaisons), and representatives of mainstream community organizations involved in the Fusion Project worked together to achieve the project's three main goals. These goals were for:

- the refugee communities to work together to share and learn about developing vibrant ethnic communities;
- each refugee family to achieve self-sufficiency and social and civic integration into their new country and community; and
- Lincoln's mainstream community to be better equipped to work with refugees.

### Fusion Project Design and Products

At the outset of the Fusion Project, the Director and a team of volunteers developed a plan to connect members of the refugee communities with local community resources. Although they were unpaid volunteers, each Liaison went through an interview process with the Project Director prior to joining the Fusion Project. The Director asked the volunteers what they felt would be effective in each of their communities to accomplish the stated goals of the project. Eventually, the Director hired a paid part-time Coordinator for each refugee group, with one of the first Coordinators coming from the original pool of volunteers. The eventual team for each refugee group included a part-time Coordinator and (ideally) three or four volunteer Liaisons.

Each team put out a quarterly newsletter with cultural advice for their refugee community. The newsletters were printed in English as well as each group's native language and were tailored to the needs of each refugee community. Topics included in the newsletters varied among the refugee groups.

Also, each team planned several educational/social events throughout the year for the members of their refugee community. An example was a picnic with food, music, and a speaker from a local community organization. Past speakers included representatives of the police and fire departments and experts on education, employment, health care issues, insurance, retirement, and Medicare/Medicaid. During the second year of Fusion, twelve such events were scheduled.

The four refugee groups typically did not hold educational/social events together. Multiple languages and multiple translators were confusing and made a presentation long and difficult to follow. Also, their meeting space was not large enough for all groups to gather at once. Events were held combining two refugee groups from countries in the same geographic area. These events used two interpreters to cover the different languages spoken by the two groups.

In addition to the larger social events, smaller training sessions targeted to a particular refugee

population were held when a need was seen. An example was an educational session on caesarean sections held in February 2009.

Working together, the teams and Director developed the 36-page Cultural Guidebook for the Lincoln Refugee Communities. The guidebook included sections on “What Everyone Should Know,” “Employment,” “Language and Education,” “Role of Police,” Health Care and Health Insurance,” and “Transportation.” The guidebook was printed in English in early 2009, with translated versions to follow, and reinforced some of the basic information refugees received at the Fusion educational/social events.

Designed to help those working for mainstream organizations understand more about the various refugee cultures, a Lunch and Learn series was launched during the second year of the project. At each of four luncheons, a panel of representatives from the four refugee communities involved in Fusion discussed a particular subject, such as raising children in their culture or laws in their country compared to those in the United States. The Lunch and Learn series continued in the third year of the project, with each event focusing on a different geographic area, rather than a particular subject. A panel of refugees presented information on the featured area and answered questions.

### Report Organization

This report presents information related to attainment of the Fusion Project goals. Findings resulting from interviews with project participants are organized around the three stated goals of the Fusion Project and some additional themes that appeared. The first paragraph (indented and italicized) in each goal section summarizes the points that follow. In the next two sections, the major themes that emerged are specified and the research design is explained. The conclusion follows the research design piece.

### **Attainment of Goals**

The Fusion Project set out to accomplish three goals related to helping refugees adjust to life in Lincoln. All respondents were enthusiastic about their connection to the project, however not all respondents were familiar enough with all aspects of the project to comment specifically on each of the goals.

#### ***Goal 1: Refugee communities work together to share and learn about developing strong ethnic communities***

*There was general agreement among Fusion staff members that the project fostered the development of teamwork both within and between teams representing the four refugee communities. Although some of the mainstream community representatives interviewed did not feel they had enough knowledge to assess progress toward the first goal, others thought the potential existed for future interaction among refugee communities. According to project staff, however, the increase in interactions among staff members from different refugee communities did not extend to their general refugee communities. Working closely together, the various teams were able to learn from each other as well as about each other. The Lunch and Learn series proved to be educational for refugees as well as the mainstream community. Staff members mentioned learning more about refugees from other areas of their home country, as well as about refugees from countries other than their own*

Respondents noted the **teamwork that developed both within and between the four teams of part-time Coordinators and volunteer Liaisons** as a positive result of the project. The Coordinators interacted in the Fusion offices while at work and developed personal connections. Also, they sometimes attended the educational/social events for other refugee groups – both to help the Coordinator in charge and to get ideas about information that might benefit their own refugee community. In a similar manner, Coordinators sometimes shared information about possible topics for their quarterly newsletters.

A representative of a mainstream community organization believed positive interactions among Coordinators from different communities would lead to increased interaction among different refugee communities. Another mainstream respondent saw the project's focus as building individual communities rather than promoting interaction among refugee communities, while noting **the opportunity for interaction among communities existed**. In contrast, Fusion staff members did not suggest the connections made among staff might result in increased interactions among refugee communities.

At the time they were interviewed, **Fusion staff members had not seen evidence of increased interactions among members of the four refugee communities**. Respondents from both the Coordinator and Liaison groups mentioned they learned about the cultures of the other refugee groups from working with the Fusion teams, however. One respondent felt they were able to pass on information about other refugee communities to members of their own community.

Through their interactions with each other, **Fusion coordinators and liaisons gained knowledge of other cultures**, knowledge of what other refugee groups needed, and knowledge of the community resources available to refugees. If a member of one team needed to find a particular resource for a member of their refugee community, they might ask members of the other refugee teams if they knew of an organization that provided the resource. A Fusion staff member gave the following example of how the team members work together:

*We call [to ask] each other ... you had a client who went through this situation and you called and you got it solved or got some answers or got some help. Could you please repeat that to me [tell me what resources you found]? .... So we try to help one another as much as we can.*

The Lunch and Learn series, designed to educate the mainstream Lincoln community, also **helped refugees learn about each other**, according to one interviewee:

*But that first one [Lunch and Learn on substance abuse held during the first year of the project], I think they [refugees] learned as much from each other as we did in the Lincoln community.*

Some respondents said they have **increased their interactions with refugees from other countries in their home region** (countries within a region might be very different with respect to language, food, customs, etc). One respondent attributed the stronger connection to other refugees from countries in their home region to interaction at Fusion educational/social events.



**Goal 2: Refugee families to achieve self-sufficiency and social and civic integration into their new country and community**

*Refugees had many adjustments to make when they arrived in Lincoln. Fusion educational/social events, quarterly newsletters, the Cultural Guidebook for the Lincoln Refugee Communities, and the Lunch and Learn series all contributed to making it easier for refugees to transition to a new country. Respondents had different opinions on which were the most successful aspects of the project, however. The Fusion Project's progress toward helping refugees with specific challenges, such as employment, was discussed by respondents, as well as the overall success of the project with respect to refugee integration into the Lincoln community.*

The magnitude of **adjusting to life in a new country** where even everyday activities such as driving a car, talking with police, accessing health care, communicating with children's schools, applying for work, or understanding insurance were unfamiliar was expressed by various respondents. **Information** gained at Fusion events or from Fusion newsletters was cited as being **valuable to refugees** who have been in Lincoln for some time, as well as new refugees. One respondent mentioned that word of mouth within a refugee community multiplied the positive effects of a Fusion educational/social event. In order to reach as many in the refugee community as possible with information, those who attended events were asked to tell others in their refugee community about what they learned.

Interviewees were asked what they felt was the **most successful part of the Fusion Project**. Their answers focused on the project's products that were aimed at helping refugees become more self-sufficient, knowledgeable, and comfortable in Lincoln. Opinions varied, but, in general, most respondents mentioned both the **educational/social events** and the **quarterly newsletters**. The majority of representatives from mainstream organizations were not as familiar with the newsletters as with the events, and this was reflected in their responses. Mainstream organization representatives who had been guest speakers at Fusion events ranked those as very helpful in getting information to refugees that would help them function more easily in the mainstream community.

Respondents who listed the **educational/social events as the most successful** part of the project said those events brought refugees together in a place where they felt comfortable and provided a venue for mainstream agency representatives to speak with them. Especially important was the opportunity the events gave the refugees to ask questions and put a "face" to an agency. The respondents saw the events as an extremely effective way to get information to refugee groups. Several speakers who represented mainstream organizations at the Fusion educational/social events mentioned specific instances of referrals to their organizations that resulted from the event. The events were fairly inexpensive to hold, and the Fusion teams gained experience in the local community when planning such an event. One respondent recalled the following example of how refugees interest in future Fusion events:

*Put my name down. I don't want to miss anything because we're really benefiting from these events, so please don't forget me.*

Respondents who deemed the **quarterly newsletters** the most successful method for integrating refugees into the local community gave multiple reasons for their choice. Newsletters were well received by refugee communities, and each community's newsletter was tailored to the specific needs of that community. Examples of newsletter topics included finance, health care, housing, and available classes. Newsletters also printed information about news in the refugee community

and the traditions of other refugee communities. The newsletters also were translated for each refugee group and were a useful reference for refugees who could not attend the Fusion educational/social events.

The Fusion staff put together a **Cultural Guidebook for the Lincoln Refugee Communities**, including sections on “What Everyone Should Know,” “Employment,” “Language and Education,” “Role of Police,” Health Care and Health Insurance,” and “Transportation.” The first printing in early 2009 was in English, with translated versions to follow. The Guidebook reinforced basic information refugees received at some of the Fusion educational/social events. Although not available at the time of many of the interviews, all respondents familiar with the Guidebook looked forward to it as a valuable tool to help refugees become more integrated in the Lincoln community.

The different cultures and customs of the refugee communities even influenced how information was presented to refugees, as illustrated by the distribution plan for the Guidebook. The Coordinators were instructed to deliver the Guidebook to refugees, show them the information, and explain how they might use the Guidebook. According to some respondents, refugees would not be likely to pick up a copy of the Guidebook that was sitting in a public place nor would they be likely to look at a Guidebook they received in the mail.

Fewer respondents mentioned the **Lunch and Learn series** in the context of the most successful part of Fusion, but those who did felt it was a valuable part of the project. Although designed to increase the mainstream community’s knowledge of the various refugee communities, one respondent felt the luncheons were just as valuable to advancing refugee knowledge of other refugee cultures.

An often mentioned **challenge for refugees** was learning the **role of the police** in Lincoln. Many refugees came from countries where the police were to be feared or bribed. Several respondents illustrated the benefits of Fusion events at which refugees got to know police officers in casual situations. Examples included a police officer explaining when and how to use 911 and refugees talking with a police officer and asking questions. The latter example resulted in instances of refugees feeling comfortable enough to ask police for help or answer officers’ questions, as illustrated by a refugee’s comment about being questioned by the police:

*Because I came to the Fusion event and I met that police officer, I wasn’t afraid anymore [to speak to the police]....They told us we can speak here [to the police in this country]. We have rights.*

**Searching for employment** is another major challenge for refugees. Refugees may not know where to look for jobs or, what is expected of them once they are hired. According to respondents, the Fusion Project staff collaborated with other Lincoln agencies to help refugees find and apply for jobs. Refugees were given information on how to fill out an application, helped to practice for a job interview, shown what to wear to an interview, and told what to expect after being hired. Several respondents linked Fusion directly to refugees finding employment with the help of a representative from a mainstream organization who attended Fusion educational/social events. An on-going partnership developed between Fusion and the mainstream organization, with the aim of helping refugees find employment. Fusion’s assistance in locating interpreters for various dialects aided the mainstream representative in facilitating the refugees’ job search process.

**Health care** in the United States varied greatly from that in many of the refugees' countries, and many refugees look at health care differently than those in the mainstream Lincoln community. One respondent felt Fusion events that focused on preventive health care held much value for their refugee group and had the potential to change their lives. Another respondent noted a recent increase in refugee doctor visits as opposed to emergency room visits as refugees became more knowledgeable about health care.

The notion of **Child Protective Services** also was unfamiliar to many refugees, and their fear of this agency's power was similar to their fear of the police. A representative of Child Protective Services spoke at a Fusion event, and was reported to help dispel refugees' fears of the agency taking their children without due process, according to one respondent.

The **general success of Fusion** with respect to increasing refugee knowledge of the Lincoln community was summarized by the following comment:

*I really think that it [Fusion] did reach a greater refugee population and I think because of the project, people are more knowledgeable about the local system and the world that they live in.*

### **Goal 3: Lincoln's mainstream community to be better equipped to work with refugees**

*Respondents listed various ways the Fusion Project became an important resource to help those working for mainstream organizations better understand and serve Lincoln's refugee communities. The project's value as a resource for mainstream organizations is evidenced by the increasing number of requests for assistance from Fusion by mainstream organizations. Fusion was valuable in helping members of the mainstream community understand that not all refugee communities share the same cultural beliefs or experiences, and this affected how mainstream agency representatives interacted with refugees. Fusion also was included in a local international festival. Fusion educational/social events turned out to be a valuable setting at which mainstream organization participants learned about refugee culture, as well as giving refugees information about the mainstream organization.*

One respondent noticed a change in Lincoln after the Fusion project began. **Mainstream organizations increasingly used Fusion as a resource** when they needed a connection to refugee communities. No other Lincoln agency was charged with providing this type of connection, which highlighted Fusion's value to the community for this respondent. A state agency's request for DVDs of the Fusion Lunch and Learn series demonstrated the recognition of Fusion by mainstream organizations.

The **Fusion office received many calls requesting that Fusion work with various mainstream organizations** to help them get information to refugees or better serve refugees. Examples included organizations being invited to participate in a Fusion event, Fusion staff presenting information to the organizations' staff members, or Fusion staff connecting organizations to resources, such as interpreters. One respondent summed up Fusion's value as an intermediary between mainstream organizations and the refugee communities:

*I think it's [Fusion's most important contribution] their willingness to connect us [mainstream organizations] with the people from these different cultures.*

Mainstream Lincoln organizations that provided services to refugees were better able to help refugee populations if the organizations' representatives had knowledge of the various refugee communities' cultures and customs, needs, and unique situations. Several respondents pointed out that Fusion played a role in helping mainstream organization representatives understand that **all refugee cultures are not the same and therefore must be related to in different ways**. Even refugees who spoke the same language could have dissimilar cultural backgrounds, and refugees' actions and reactions often were a function of their past experiences.

The need to understand a particular refugee's culture and past experiences was illustrated when emergency room workers at a local hospital had a difficult time finding out about the possible injuries to a group of refugees involved in an accident. Although the interpreter provided did speak their language, the interpreter was not familiar with the refugees' particular culture and did not understand why the refugees did not want to speak about their injuries. Through their connection with Fusion staff, the hospital staff later learned that in the culture of these refugees, a boy or man would not be likely to discuss his pain or injury with a woman, and female nurses were asking (through the interpreter) the refugees to explain their injuries. As a result of this experience, the staff realized that in order to best serve the refugees they needed a **better understanding of the culture** of the refugees.

The Fusion Project provided speakers who gave information on the refugee culture and also worked with the hospital to provide education to refugee women on childbirth and available health care in Lincoln. More broadly, Fusion worked to supplement and verify refugee cultural information for inclusion in a training manual.

The most cited example of a refugee's past experiences having an effect on their actions was that of refugees who are afraid of police or believe that it is standard to bribe a police officer. Although not all refugee groups or individuals have had bad experiences with law enforcement, it was mentioned in connection with three of the refugee groups. This information helped police officers in interactions with refugees.

The Fusion Project was asked to **participate in the Celebrate Lincoln International Festival**, which indicated to two respondents that Fusion was becoming better known among mainstream organizations. Several respondents mentioned they would like the Fusion Project to be even better known in the general Lincoln community. Wider marketing of the project or an open house highlighting the refugee communities were suggested. One respondent indicated the need for greater visibility of Fusion among refugees as well as the mainstream Lincoln population.

The Fusion **educational/social events proved to allow bi-direction information exchange**. Refugees received information about life in Lincoln from mainstream speakers and, in addition, participants from mainstream organizations met and talked with refugees and learned about their culture. One mainstream participant welcomed the opportunity to let refugees get to know them and feel more comfortable asking their agency for help. As the result of attending a Fusion event, another respondent learned some refugee communities were less open to outside help than the respondent had assumed, which affected the respondent's ability to help those refugees. This positive result of the project was mentioned by multiple respondents and is illustrated by this response:

*It wasn't only about refugees learning to adjust to the system and ... accessing these services. It was also about service providers ... learning more about those communities and their cultures.*

### ***Additional Comments by Respondents***

*The following comments did not “fit” specifically under any of the three goals discussed above, but the information may be valuable to those interested in the Fusion Project. Most themes were related to project staff: not enough time to accomplish all their work; turnover; and using any additional funds for additional paid staff and staff training. The final topic, personal consequences of association with the Fusion Project, included comments by both staff and mainstream community members.*

Many staff members voiced concern over the **lack of time** to do all that is needed for the project. This was mentioned by both paid and volunteer staff.

A few respondents mentioned there was some **turnover** in the part-time Coordinator and volunteer Liaison positions. Since these positions took time to hire and train, frequent turnover was a cost to the program. It was noted that, typically, the refugee was relocating or leaving the Fusion position for a better opportunity, rather than because of any fault of the project. The turnover in Fusion staff was partially responsible for delaying implementation of a program a mainstream organization was working on with Fusion.

More than one respondent also pointed out additional funds might help the project achieve its goals. The following uses of any additional funding were among those proposed: **additional staff; salaries for volunteers; more interpreters; and staff training.**

The Fusion Project resulted in some positive personal consequences for staff members, including greater integration into the community, increased communication skills, pleasure derived from helping others, knowledge gained about various refugee communities’ needs, and skills learned by working with others on the project. Mainstream respondents commenting on how Fusion influenced them personally spoke of meeting friends they would not have come to know without the connections of Fusion and enjoyment from learning about refugees, as well as the value of meeting and speaking with refugees served by their mainstream organization.

### **Major Themes**

Overall, those interviewed about the Fusion Project were very positive and expressed desire for the program to continue. The major themes that emerged from the interview responses follow.

- The structure of the Fusion teams and their working closely together promoted interactions among the staff members from various refugee groups, along with an interchange of knowledge regarding other refugee communities’ needs and successes.
- Interactions among the four refugee communities did not increase in the same manner as among the Fusion staff members.

The four teams of Fusion staff members worked closely together, which helped them learn about the needs of other refugee communities and also the successes of other refugee communities. Sharing such knowledge was evidence of progress toward the project’s first goal. The increases in interactions among refugee community members who were part of the Fusion staff were not replicated among members of the general refugee communities, however.

- The educational/social events and quarterly newsletters produced by the Fusion staff were very successful in helping refugees gain information about the Lincoln community and local organizations that serve refugees.

Although each of the outputs of the Fusion project contributed to helping refugees become more accustomed to life in a new country, many respondents listed the educational/social events and the quarterly newsletters as most successful in that respect. All translations of the Cultural Guidebook for the Lincoln Refugee Communities had not been distributed at the time of the evaluation interviewees, but it had the potential to be a lasting resource for the refugee population.

- The Fusion Project, in collaboration with a mainstream organization, was instrumental in helping refugees gain employment.

Refugees become more self-sufficient when they are employed and earn an income. A direct consequence of Fusion's relationship with a mainstream organization was refugee employment.

- Mainstream organizations were using Fusion as a resource to help the organizations better serve refugee communities.

Mainstream organizations increased their use of Fusion as a resource to help them serve refugees, and the project was invited to participate in an annual international festival held in Lincoln. Fusion provided a needed link from mainstream organizations to refugee communities. Even though Fusion experienced increased visibility among mainstream organizations, respondents recommended additional marketing of the project to make even more organizations aware of Fusion.

- Interacting with individual refugees at educational/social events helped mainstream participants learn about the culture of the refugee community in attendance.
- All refugee communities are not the same; each group has unique needs and challenges.
- Mainstream organizations will better serve refugees if they take the culture and past experiences of each refugee group into account.

Mainstream organization representatives who attended Fusion events found they increased their knowledge of different refugee cultures, which increased their ability to provide services to refugees. A significant part of progress toward the third goal was the realization of project participants that various refugee communities have unique needs and challenges. With this in mind, a mainstream organization representative could tailor their interactions with members of diverse refugee groups.

- Many staff members had more work to do than time to accomplish what was needed.
- Staff members gained valuable experience from their work on Fusion.

The Fusion Project set forth ambitious goals and filled a gap in the Lincoln community, as shown by staff members' comments regarding not having enough time to do all the work that was needed for the project. Some respondents suggested the project could have used additional funding for items such as more staff, salaries for volunteer staff, staff training, and additional interpreters.

In addition to progress toward its three main goals, the Fusion Project resulted in some personal consequences for staff members. Team members listed greater integration into the community, improved communication skills, pleasure derived from helping others, more knowledge of various refugee communities' needs, and learning from project leaders as outcomes of their work with Fusion. Mainstream respondents also spoke of personal results from their connection with fusion, including meeting friends they would not have come to know without the connections of Fusion and enjoyment from learning about refugees, as well as the value of meeting and speaking with refugees served by their mainstream organization.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative methodology was used to mine the experiences of the Fusion participants and to capture their impressions of the results of the project. Twelve project participants were interviewed between December 2008 and February 2009. Face to face interviews in all cases but one (one of the volunteers was interviewed via telephone) allowed the interviewers to meet each respondent in the setting of the respondent's choice. The small sample also allowed interviewers to spend adequate time with each respondent to probe beyond the initial questions and to hear their rich individual experiences. Generally, interviews ranged in length from 16 minutes to 45 minutes. One interview lasted slightly over two hours. A semi-structured interview script provided a similar structure for all interviews, but allowed for variation in the order of the questions and the follow-up questions. Semi-structured interviews are a commonly used and highly regarded qualitative method, according to Barbour in Introducing Qualitative Research (Barbour, 2008).

Various dimensions of participants' experiences were explored. The interviews began with questions about how and when the respondent came to be involved with the Fusion Project and moved on to outcomes from the project, what was successful, what wasn't as effective, and what might be done differently. Questions about observed changes in the refugee communities and mainstream organizations and personal consequences noticed as a result of the respondents' involvement with the project concluded the interviews.

At the start of each interview, the evaluation process was explained to the interviewee. The interviewee was asked if they were willing to participate and was reminded they were not required to participate. Interviewees also were told they could stop the interview at any point and could decline to answer any or all questions. Participants were given contact information for the main researcher for the evaluation, as well as for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board. Participants also were informed that their individual answers would not be associated with them in the evaluation report. Interviewees were asked specifically if they would give verbal permission to allow us to digitally record their interview.

Verbal, rather than written consent was used because the refugee participants might have felt uncomfortable signing an official document. Also, although many of the participants were fluent when speaking English, they might not be as fluent when reading English.

All interviews were digitally recorded, saved to an electronic audio file, and transcribed. Atlas.ti (qualitative data analysis software) was used to code and analyze the interview data.

The Project Director made the initial contacts with the prospective interviewees: the project's current part-time (paid) Coordinators; the project's current and past volunteer (unpaid) Liaisons; and representatives of mainstream organizations that provide community services. We followed

up with those willing to be contacted and arranged a time and place for each interview that was satisfactory to the participant. The Project Director, three part-time Coordinators, three volunteer Liaisons, and five mainstream community members made up the pool of twelve interviewees. The Project Director, the three part-time Coordinators, and one of the three volunteer Liaisons were interviewed at the Asian Community and Cultural Center. We met the second volunteer Liaison at their office and the third was interviewed via telephone. With the exception of one interview held at the Public Policy Center, all representatives of mainstream organizations were interviewed at their offices.

The interview notes and electronic audio files only are accessible to project personnel with CITI training. The interview notes are stored in a locked file cabinet at the Public Policy Center and the electronic files are maintained in a password protected computer file.

In addition to the granting agency requesting the evaluation, Fusion staff, Lincoln refugee communities, and mainstream Lincoln organizations working with Fusion, other communities contemplating a similar project might find the results of the evaluation study helpful.

### Data Validity

Qualitative research is based on interpreting information drawn from respondents, such as survey responses, interview responses, or focus group conversations. When verbal responses are transcribed prior to analysis, the accuracy of the transcription is a key to valid data and results. Yang and Lê's examination of the challenges of cross-language qualitative research (Yang & Lê, 2008) holds important information for those interviewing and transcribing interviews of respondents for whom English is a second language.

Researchers found that even though a respondent might have a good grasp of spoken English, the wording of interview questions was sometimes difficult to understand and therefore the respondent's answer did not reflect the question asked. In addition, it was sometimes difficult for transcriptionists to understand all responses, and some transcribed files had many blanks.

Researchers dealt with these challenges during interviews by restating questions that the interviewee did not appear to understand and attempting to clarify their answers. Also, post-interview, the interviewer went over the transcribed files to fill in as many of the blanks as possible.

### **Conclusion**

The Fusion Project targeted four refugee communities in Lincoln, Nebraska. Two specific goals were to help African, Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern refugees work together to build stronger ethnic communities and become more self-sufficient and integrated into the Lincoln community. The third goal was to better equip Lincoln's mainstream community to work with refugees.

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center evaluated the Fusion Project with respect to the goals set forth. The experiences and observations of twelve project participants were collected through semi-structured interviews. Their interviews were transcribed and responses were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software to identify major themes.



The Fusion Project was successful in aspects of all three goals. The Fusion teams worked closely together and developed relationships that fostered an exchange of knowledge among the refugee coordinators and liaisons representing the four refugee communities. Lessons learned by Fusion staff from one refugee group were passed on to staff from the other refugee groups. In contrast, the broader refugee communities in Lincoln did not experience the increases in interactions and knowledge seen among the Fusion staff members.

All the Fusion products and events were seen as helpful, though two were mentioned more than others. The educational/social events and the quarterly newsletters were successful in helping refugees gain information about the Lincoln community. Information pertaining to various aspects of searching for employment was disseminated at Fusion educational/social events. This knowledge proved useful in helping refugees find employment, thereby encouraging self-sufficiency and integration into the local community. Newsletters included tips on various topics, were customized to meet the information needs of each community, and reached those who did not attend events.

Fusion's success also can be measured by reports of increased use of Fusion resources by mainstream organizations. Interactions with refugees at Fusion events gave mainstream participants new insights into the refugees' cultures. An important realization was that all refugee communities are different; each group had a unique culture and background experiences that shaped their actions. Taking a refugee group's culture and background into consideration increased an organization's ability to serve refugees.

Even though Fusion was used increasingly by mainstream organizations, respondents called for more visibility of the project and suggested additional marketing of Fusion. Respondents' notion that Fusion had value to offer to additional mainstream organizations was another mark of the project's success.

The Fusion staff was committed to helping refugees, but many mentioned they had more work to do than time to complete their work. The refugees who worked as Fusion staff gained valuable experience from their work on Fusion, however, including greater integration into the community, improved communication skills, more knowledge of various refugee communities' needs, and working with project leaders.

Project participants were complimentary of Fusion in general, but a few suggestions were offered. Respondents suggesting improvements to the Fusion Project often mentioned that additional funds would be helpful. The funds could be used for additional staff, which would help the time crunch felt by many staff members, or salaries for volunteers, which might decrease the turnover rate in that position. Training for staff also was mentioned as a use for additional funds, as well as hiring interpreters for Fusion.

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