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Fusion Project Evaluation (2009-2010)

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Fusion Project Evaluation (2009-2010)

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Executive Summary

Begun in 2006, the Fusion Project connects new refugees and their communities with local community resources in Lincoln, Nebraska. One of three goals of the Fusion Project is equipping Lincoln's mainstream community to work with four refugee communities: African, Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern. The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center evaluated the Fusion Project with respect to this goal using the information gathered through two facilitated focus groups. Representatives of local agencies and attendees at Fusion educational events were invited to attend the groups... Responses from the eleven participants were compiled and analyzed to identify major themes. The results from the focus groups were compared to the results from an earlier evaluation of the Fusion Project.

Focus group participants identified three main ways in which the Fusion Project has helped mainstream organizations better serve refugee communities:

- Fusion fills gaps not filled by other organizations that work with refugees
- Fusion educates refugees and agency representatives
- Fusion connects refugees with services

Participants related multiple examples of benefits to agencies and refugees as the result of Fusion's activities.

Focus group participants had a number of suggestions for improving Fusion's efforts at helping mainstream organizations better serve refugee communities:

- Case management and provision of direct services
- Consolidating case management and other services at one location
- Offering legal assistance
- Extending education about Lincoln's refugee groups to the larger Lincoln community

Participants noted, however, that they believe the current Fusion staff is not large enough to fully implement many of their suggestions.

Results from the two focus groups were compared to the results of a previous evaluation of the Fusion Project. Many of the same themes were identified regarding the benefits of the Fusion Project to Lincoln mainstream organizations. For example, participants related that Fusion's education programs helped mainstream agency staff members understand that all refugee cultures are not the same. Many interview participants also mentioned that knowledge shared at these programs flowed both ways – from refugees to agency representatives and from agency representatives to refugees. In fact, focus group participants relayed some of the same anecdotes of Fusion's success as the interviewees from the previous evaluation, possibly due to the close proximity in time of the two evaluations. This year, however, there appeared to be more specific examples of partnerships Fusion formed with mainstream organizations. This may indicate Fusion is becoming a more integral part of the system of organizations that serve Lincoln's various refugee groups. The current evaluation also found participants mentioning the importance of continuing the educational programs offered to mainstream organizations, because agency staff changes and refugees continue to need assistance. This comment was not as prevalent in the prior evaluation.

Introduction

The Fusion Project connects new refugees and their communities with local community resources in Lincoln, Nebraska. Four refugee communities are the focus of the project: African, Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern. Fusion began in October 2006 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement to the Asian Community and Cultural Center. In October 2009 the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement awarded a new grant to continue the Fusion Project for an additional three years.

The Fusion Project has three goals:

1. Refugee communities work together to share and learn about developing vibrant ethnic communities.
2. Each refugee family achieves self-sufficiency and social and civic integration into their new country and community.
3. Lincoln's mainstream community becomes better equipped to work with refugees.

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center was engaged to evaluate the Fusion Project at the end of the first year of the second grant (2009-2010). The evaluation concentrated on Fusion's achievement in reaching Goal 3: Lincoln's mainstream community will be better equipped to work with refugees. To provide evaluative information about the project, the Public Policy Center conducted two focus groups of mainstream organization representatives in August and September of 2010. The results of the focus groups are presented and compared to feedback received during the Public Policy Center's previous evaluation of the Fusion Project (Perkins & Shank, 2009), conducted during the first three years of the project (2006 – 2009). For that evaluation, twelve semi structured interviews were conducted with project staff members and representatives of participating mainstream community organizations. Interview questions were designed to capture respondents' experiences with the Fusion Project, their perceptions of the impact of the project, what project activities they felt were successful, what activities they felt weren't as effective, and respondents' suggestions for what might be done differently.

Focus Group Results

Focus group participants were extremely positive about Fusion's role in helping Lincoln's mainstream community be better equipped to work with refugees. Major themes that emerged from the focus group discussions were: Fusion fills gaps not filled by other organizations that work with refugees; Fusion educates refugees and agency representatives; and Fusion connects refugees with services.

Fusion Fills Gaps

Many of the focus group participants commented on Fusion's help in leveraging the work done by their agencies. One agency representative pointed out that Fusion fills gaps other agencies can't fill because of the language/culture barrier. One of the participants commented, "We definitely cannot imagine Fusion not being there."

Participants mentioned partnering with Fusion in various ways to help refugee families. A particular agency works with refugees for a limited time, and their representative felt Fusion was the logical next step for those refugees to find assistance in navigating the services system.

Providing transportation, child care, and interpreters were seen by focus group participants as valuable aid given by Fusion to agencies working to assist refugees. One agency representative stated they could not have held large educational/social events without Fusion's assistance and the incentives they provide. A

specific example of Fusion’s typical role in the events was providing transportation and food to refugees attending an event featuring a speaker from the local Census Office. The incentives increased the number of refugees attending and receiving information about Census forms. Some representatives said Fusion identified interpreters for and transportation to employment interviews, assistance with employment applications, child care during educational/social events, and transportation to parenting activities.

Another agency received help from the Fusion staff in multiple ways when working with the Sudanese refugee group. The agency representative said, “It made a huge difference once we worked with the advocates and started finding out [specific things about the Sudanese culture].” As a result, the agency made some explicit changes to allow Sudanese families more access to services. In a related instance, Fusion helped educate authorities regarding Sudanese culture and the roles of the eldest son in the family and also educated Sudanese parents regarding their role as legal guardian of their children.

At the close of one of the focus group discussions, an agency representative summed up their view of how Fusion fills the gaps and how Fusion and local agencies complement each other. “What we all [agencies that provide services] do is connecting the dots. Fusion kind of colors the picture a little bit. So, it’s great to have them.”

Fusion Educates

Fusion’s education programs act in multiple ways to increase the effectiveness of agencies that offer help to refugees, according to focus group participants. Fusion educational/social events provide a forum for refugees to learn about the services offered by various agencies and to meet representatives of those agencies. Also, agency representatives presenting information at the events have an opportunity to learn more about the refugees attending an event. In addition to the educational/social events for refugees, Fusion coordinates refugee panels that have presented information about the needs of various refugee groups to mainstream providers. Giving information and getting information through the Fusion events is a “very good process,” according to an agency representative.

Fusion educates refugees about the community. Focus group participants saw value in the Fusion Project’s ability to help refugees and newcomers feel welcome in general and become more aware of basic laws and customs in Lincoln. One participant mentioned that Fusion is exploring partnering with driver’s education to offer a course in a language other than English. Many of the participants reiterated the importance of education in the basics (i.e., transportation, where to find health care, and the role of the police). Some of the focus group participants observed that parents in refugee families can be confused by the laws in this country regarding child discipline. Often their children attend school, learn to speak English, and assimilate into the American culture more quickly than their parents. Sometimes children try to control their parents by saying the parent will be in trouble with the police if they don’t do as the child wishes. Some refugee parents met with police to discuss gangs and also learned that the police would not arrest them for saying “no” to their children. The police talked to the parents about what type of discipline was allowed in the U.S. An agency representative reported that as a result of receiving this education about discipline and the role of the police, one of the parents was able to stand up to her child.

Fusion educates mainstream community organizations about refugees. Most focus group participants mentioned it is crucial to understand that all refugee communities are not the same. Lincoln agencies serve various refugee communities, and each refugee community has different cultural norms that need to be taken into account when providing services to refugees. Refugees are more receptive to the help offered if the agency representatives respect their culture. For example, Arabic women may not want to go to a male physician, and agency staff members need to take this into account when making medical appointments for Arabic clients. Some of the focus group participants reported the Fusion Lunch and

Learn series provided an opportunity for their agency's staff to learn about the cultural differences of refugee groups, as well as the adjustment process for refugees in Lincoln.

In a specific instance, an organization that serves children and families learned more about various refugee cultures through Fusion Project activities. This helped them to understand how they might better work with refugee families. Fusion also provided information to help train the organization's staff with respect to cultural differences. An agency representative reported that participants in the cultural awareness training were surprised to learn of some of the cultural differences.

During the discussion of Fusion's educational activities, the point was brought up that education of refugees and local agency staff needs to be ongoing. Agency staff turnover necessitates continuing to offer events such as the Lunch and Learn series. A participant pointed out refugees who have been in the U.S. for more than a year might continue to need help connecting with local services.

Fusion Connects

Multiple focus group participants mentioned that Fusion establishes connections between refugees and mainstream agencies. A focus group participant stated that Fusion helps refugees to be "aware of the help they can get [from local agencies]." Another participant from a local agency serving refugees stated, "I just really appreciate the information that Fusion has brought..." The agency representative felt anything that helps an agency build trust and relate to refugee families assists the agency in helping those families. "That's the important part."

In another instance, Fusion Project staff pointed out that a group of refugees who were trained in a profession in their home country and who spoke English fluently were in a different situation than many refugees in Lincoln. This refugee group found it easier to learn the American culture because they spoke English, but individuals were frustrated because they were finding it difficult to use their professional training in this country. As a result of the input from Fusion staff, a local agency began a pilot project with a one-on-one professional mentoring program to help those refugees toward professional positions.

Suggestions for the Fusion Project

Focus group participants had several suggestions for how Fusion might continue to help Lincoln's mainstream community be better equipped to work with refugees: case management and provision of direct services; consolidating case management and other services at one location; offering some type of legal assistance; and extending education regarding Lincoln's refugee groups to the mainstream population.

The focus group participants were very positive when speaking of the Fusion Project activities, but did have suggestions for additional ways the Fusion project could help agencies work with refugees in Lincoln. Many of the local agency representatives suggested that case management and providing direct services are top priorities because the refugee population is growing, resulting in high case loads at local agencies. They felt one-on-one or one-on-family contact was essential to helping refugees obtain necessary services. Involvement of Fusion in case management was seen as particularly valuable for refugees who do not speak English. The participants recognized that the current Fusion staff is small and they can't do it all, but saw value in having Fusion become involved in direct service provision along with case management.

Another idea echoed by multiple participants was bringing all caseworkers together, under one roof. This would benefit both refugees and caseworkers. Similarly, the broader notion of a welcome center serving various refugee populations was suggested. During conversation about what might be offered at such a

center, legal assistance and general information services were mentioned, as well as case management services.

Participants believed that refugees would benefit from additional help with legal problems. According to some of the focus group participants, minor problems (e.g., car registration, failure to appear in court for misdemeanor offenses) become major problems when refugees do not understand what their responsibilities are and the consequences of not complying with the law. A participant suggested refugees might have more trust in the legal system if they received help with minor problems. Another agency representative observed legal services related to immigration are not available in Lincoln and stressed the importance of access to these services. The only area legal help with citizenship is in Omaha, and it can be difficult to schedule appointments there.

Participants in both focus groups expressed interest in Fusion becoming more involved in increasing the awareness of the general mainstream community with respect to the refugee groups living in Lincoln. Increased mainstream community awareness of refugee groups was suggested as a way to decrease fear and resistance to refugees. One agency representative felt the Fusion Center “is really critical to the community as a whole in terms of ...awareness for people who don’t know anything about immigrants/refugees...” “In the long run, especially, it’s just invaluable to have something like that [Fusion].” One participant suggested the possibility of applying for various types of donated public service or advertising campaigns.

Comparison to September 2009 Evaluation Report – Goal Three

The following paragraph from the *Fusion Project Evaluation (2006–2009)* (Perkins & Shank, 2009) summarized progress toward helping Lincoln’s mainstream community be better equipped to work with refugees: during the first three years of the Fusion Project:

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.

Opinions voiced after the first three years of the Fusion Project on Fusion’s progress toward helping Lincoln’s mainstream community be better equipped to work with refugees (i.e., the importance of understanding all refugee cultures are not the same; refugees learn from mainstream agency representatives at Fusion events and agency representative learn from the refugees at those same events) resonate through this year’s focus group comments as well. Focus group members stressed the value of continuing the education offered by Fusion, due to agency staff turnover.

Participants relayed some of the same examples of how Fusion has helped refugees navigate the local services system as during the past evaluation, which is not surprising since the evaluations were separated by only one year. This year participants seemed to provide more specific examples of partnering with mainstream agencies to help refugees understand the legal system and services available to them than

they did in the 2009 evaluation. This may indicate that Fusion's activities have permeated more deeply into the network of Lincoln's mainstream organizations that interact with and serve refugees.

Research Design

This report does not reflect a representative sample of the agencies interacting with Fusion during the past year. Individuals in the focus groups were recruited based on their involvement in and knowledge of Fusion, or their knowledge of refugee communities.

The August focus group was recruited by the Fusion Project Coordinator. An e-mail invitation was sent to 12 agency representatives who had participated in a Fusion Project training or cultural outreach activity during the past year. Recipients of the invitation had the option of forwarding the invitation to others who also had attended the Fusion training or outreach activities. The invitation resulted in five participants at the August 24, 2010 focus group.

The September focus group was recruited by a member of the group that wrote the original grant application for the Fusion Project. An e-mail was sent to 12 agencies that interacted with the Fusion Project, requesting that a representative from that agency who is familiar with the work of the Fusion Project attend the Fusion focus group. Six representatives participated in the September 13, 2010 focus group. Four of the six participants in this group mainly work with refugees. The remaining two participants represented organizations that focus on the general population, including refugees.

The focus group participants had varying connections to the Fusion Project. Some attended educational programs put on by Fusion. Others represent agencies currently working with Fusion to connect refugees with services offered by the agencies. The agency representatives refer clients to Fusion, receive clients referred by Fusion, collaborate with Fusion to hold social/education events for refugee groups, speak at Fusion events, use Fusion interpreters, learn about needs of various refugee groups from refugee panels that present information to them, and partner with Fusion in various instances to help refugee families.

A semi-structured research protocol was followed. The facilitator initiated the discussion at each focus group using a list of nine questions, but diverged from the list and used follow-up probe questions as needed. The list of questions was distributed at the outset of the September 2010 focus group, to give participants an idea of the direction of the discussion.

Conclusion

Focus group participants were positive about Fusion's success in helping agencies deliver services to refugees. Agency representatives who have worked closely with the Fusion Project feel strongly that Fusion has played an important role in helping mainstream organizations better serve refugee communities. Participants cited Fusion's success in filling gaps, educating both refugees and agency representatives, and connecting refugees with organizations that provide services as evidence of progress toward their third goal.

Focus group participants offered suggestions as to how the Fusion Project could further help agencies deliver services to refugees. High on the list of suggestions was providing case management and direct services to refugees. The majority of participants also agreed that some type of welcome center providing case management, legal assistance, and education at one location would be valuable. Participants from both focus groups suggested Fusion take a more active role in educating the general public about Lincoln's refugee population.

The comments are similar to comments about Fusion's work with mainstream organizations presented in the evaluation completed last year (Perkins & Shank, 2009). The discussion at this year's focus groups involved more specific examples of how Fusion and mainstream agencies work together to help refugees navigate the local system of services organizations than did comments from the prior report. This may be a sign that, over time, Fusion has become more a part of the system of organizations serving refugees in Lincoln.

Acknowledgments

The researchers thank the organizers of the focus groups for sending out invitations and all the focus group participants for taking the time to give their opinions regarding the Fusion Project.

References

Perkins, T., & Shank, N. (2009). *Fusion Project Evaluation (2006-2009)*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Public Policy Center.



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