

Iowa City Press-Citizen

LIFE

Iowa City group creates series highlighting refugee and immigrant experiences in Iowa



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If the Iowa City Foreign Relation Council's latest program, "Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa," creates a more "empathetic populace," project director Peter Gerlach would take that as a success.

Gerlach is a board member of the nonprofit, which promotes understanding international issues through programs for the community. He's also a University of Iowa adjunct assistant professor in International Studies.

And he is leading a project that connects leaders from organizations providing assistance to refugees, state agencies and more for conversations related to the refugee and immigrant experience in Iowa.

"Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa" is a six-part educational series that touches on topics from pursuing higher education to COVID-19's effect on immigrant and refugee populations. These virtual discussions will carry on through May, and ICFRC will release a final report shaped by the series, research and additional resources that are learned in the process.

The latest discussion, "Life as a Refugee and Immigrant in Iowa" is at noon Wednesday. All six upcoming and previous discussions can be found on the Iowa City Foreign Relations Council's website under the events calendar tab.

The series aims to amplify the voices of refugees and immigrants.

It's also about amplifying the nonprofits, state and local agencies and individuals who welcome and support these communities, from those new to Iowa to immigrant communities that have lived in the state for awhile.

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The goal is for people to get a deeper understanding of the cultures and countries that refugees and immigrants are from, as well as their experiences once they arrive.

“A lot of people, they see headlines, they know about refugees and immigrants because they hear it somewhere else. But they so rarely meet individuals. They rarely hear directly from people speaking about their own experiences,” Gerlach said.

Through this series, people will hear from immigrants and have the opportunity to ask questions.

As of 2019, there were an estimated 177,769 foreign-born people in Iowa, meaning anyone not a U.S. citizen or U.S. national at birth. They largely hail from Latin America, Asia and Africa, according to the U.S. Census Bureau data. The 2020 U.S. Census estimates that 5.3% of Iowa's population between 2015 and 2019 was foreign-born.

In 2019, the Des Moines Register reported an estimated 60,000 foreign-born residents lived in Des Moines metro alone.

What are the six topics featured in the series?

The topics chosen for "Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa" were ones Gerlach felt to be the most pressing, as well as what might interest the audience.

The series began in December with “Resettling Afghan Refugees in Iowa,” a topic of urgency after the War in Afghanistan ended and the Taliban regained power there.

The Des Moines Register reported in September that 695 Afghan evacuees were expected to resettle in Iowa.

Refugees from Afghanistan aren't the only population to settle in Iowa.

The Iowa Department of Human Services report that refugees from Southeast Asian nations like Vietnam and Cambodia came during the mid-1970s to 1980s, with Iowa recognized as the first state to offer resettlement assistance to these refugees in 1975. A decade later, refugees from Eastern European and African countries like Sudan grew, followed by Burmese and Iraqi refugees beginning in 2006.

Gerlach said other topics were chosen largely based on discussions that he had with Kathryn Wittneben, executive director of the foreign relations council.

They consulted with others, including Mak Suceska of the Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services.

Suceska encouraged adding a discussion on employment. That led to a panelist whose work focuses on employment services at the Catherine McAuley Center, a nonprofit in Cedar Rapids serving immigrants, refugees and women experiencing crisis.

The upcoming virtual discussions are:

What: "Life in Iowa as a Refugee and Immigrant" explores how the experience of moving to Iowa differs among people and is compounded by other factors, including immigration status and moving to an area with or without familial ties. Panelists will also share how organizations predominately comprised of refugees or immigrants — ethnic community-based organizations — support new Iowans, and what people should know about their new neighbors and how to support them.

When: Noon to 1:30 p.m. Jan. 19.

Speakers: Zalmay Niazzy, Elizabeth Bernal, Ines Pecucvic-Jasarovic and Rex Mwamba

What: "How COVID-19 has Impacted Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa" explores how refugee and immigrant communities were resilient in light of COVID-19 and the challenges that were exacerbated by the pandemic. It will also explore how healthy Iowa communities are those that listen to, learn from and support all community members.

When: Noon to 1:30 p.m., Feb. 9

Speakers: Erin Hayward, Adrien Silva, Lata D'Mello and Alyssa Clayden

What: "Area Refugees and Immigrants in Pursuit of Higher Education" explores the experiences of refugee and immigrant students who pursued admission to Iowa universities and shares support programs and resources in the state. Panelists will also share how diversifying campuses with students from all backgrounds makes for a better space for all.

When: Noon to 1:30 p.m. March 23

Speakers: Vinh Nguyen, Anne Kiche and Mallory Petsche

What: "Writing and Reading About the Refugee and Immigrant Experience" will invite speakers to share their experiences in writing their migration stories and why they did so. Panelists will also discuss what publishing first-hand refugee and immigrant accounts offers readers and society.

When: Noon to 1:30 p.m. April 13

Speakers: Andrea Wilson, others TBD

The series ends in May with "Refugees and Immigrants – How their Stories Inform Public Policy." Other details are being determined.

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Building a diverse set of speakers for the series

Gerlach teaches a course at UI every spring called Community Engaged Learning with Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa.

Some of the panelists who are speaking in this series have been guests in Gerlach's class or will be this spring.

But Gerlach wanted to reach people beyond the Iowa City area for this series.

He also sought a diverse set of individuals, thinking about who might be best to speak on each topic.

While he asked for some recommendations, as well as did online research, Gerlach tapped into connections like Sucasca and his participation in monthly Refugee Alliance of Eastern Iowa meetings. That put Gerlach in direct contact with a network of people directly supporting refugees and immigrants.

"Balance was important in thinking about all the sessions, so as much as possible we wanted to have a truly diverse group of people," Gerlach said.

That meant having more people of color and fewer men, he said. It meant featuring people from across the state, including as many who identify as refugees or immigrants as possible, and people from a diverse array of countries.

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'We've never done anything like this before'

As with most organizations, the pandemic impacted the foreign relations council and how it conducted programs.

Wittneben, who became executive director in April 2021, was stepping into the position amid pandemic-related programming changes and as its 40th anniversary in 2023 looms.

"We started looking at how can we as an organization deepen our impact in our community and do more community outreach and engagement here?" she said. "How can we bring in more diverse voices? And this project seemed to fit that really well."

"Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa" has received support from the UI Center for Human Rights, which is co-sponsoring the series, Wittneben said. Ethnic community-based organizations and state organizations working with refugees and immigrants have also offered support.

Plus, there was a \$9,530 Humanities Iowa and National Endowment for the Humanities grant for this project that the foreign relations council had to match.

According to Gerlach, Wittneben wanted to do a themed series each spring, and this would be the first.

"We've never done anything like this before," he said. "And so, we're hoping that this can be the first of many and propel the project into more of an advocacy space."

Foreign relations council program committee chair and board member William Reisinger believed a topic like this needed to be presented as a longer series.

"One of the things that we tried to make clear in our proposal to the Humanities Iowa is that this is a topic that deserves that kind of treatment, that deserves a chance for local and regional audiences to really dive in and see things from a lot of different angles, because there are different facets of this," he said.

The many outcomes of 'Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa'

"Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa" will conclude with a final report, though it's too early to say what that will consist of.

"I think our goal really here is to raise the voices and experience of immigrants to inform public policy," Wittneben said.

Part of the report, Wittneben said, will be looking at Iowa's history, exploring how some communities did well in supporting refugees and immigrants and the issues they faced at the local level. The report will also look at the resources available to all the groups that help resettle refugees.

Reisinger said having closer ties to the organizations tapped into for the series will benefit the foreign relations council and its ability to host important presenters in the future.

"Refugees and Immigrants in Iowa" also will look at how organizations run by refugees and immigrants function, and learn from those individuals.

According to Gerlach, the series encourages people to think about how engaging with refugees and immigrants increases empathy and understanding. It also benefits communities across Iowa "to thrive as diverse people living together," he said.

"(If people thought) 'I didn't know that. I should really think differently about this. Immigration is far more complicated. It's very human. It's very personal. It's very sensitive. I've never had the opportunity to speak to somebody from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I've never heard somebody talk about how much work it takes to resettle somebody from Afghanistan. Maybe I can do a little bit more in my own life,'" Gerlach said. "We take those as wins."

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