



# Globally Minded, Locally Serving: Refugee Health in Philadelphia

**Student Interns:**

Sarah Jamieson, Thomas Jefferson University, Department of Occupational Therapy  
Angelica Montes, Thomas Jefferson University, Sidney Kimmel Medical College

**Community Preceptor:  
Academic Preceptor(s):**

Gretchen Shanfeld, MPH, Nationalities Service Center  
Rickie Brawer, PhD, MPH, Thomas Jefferson University  
Caryn Johnson, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA, Thomas Jefferson University  
James D. Plumb, MD, MPH, Thomas Jefferson University

**Healthy People 2020**

- Access to Health Care
- Educational Advancement/ Literacy
- Health Communication
- Oral Health
- Nutrition and Weight Status

## Introduction

A refugee is someone who is forced to leave their country of origin due to war, violence, or persecution. The United States is the world’s top resettlement country. Out of the 50 states, Pennsylvania is 5<sup>th</sup> in terms of the number of annually resettled refugees. Each year, Philadelphia resettles approximately 800 refugees. Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, Eritrea, Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo are the most frequent countries of origin in Philadelphia.

## Community Center

The Nationalities Service Center (NSC) is one of the three resettlement agencies in Philadelphia. Located in Center City, NSC provides an array of resettlement services, including housing, health care, and employment resources for immigrants and refugees. To meet the health needs of Philadelphia, all three resettlement agencies participate in the Philadelphia Refugee Health Collaborative (PRHC). This coalition between resettlement agencies and local health care providers ensures that refugees receive quality and timely care upon and after arrival.



## Goals and Expectations

- Improve and provide refugee access to health care
- Provide health information and education
- Equip refugees with skills for healthy living
- Create sustainable programs and materials for the NSC health team
- Gain a better understanding of the refugee experience

## Achievement of Goals

- Access to health care:**
  - scheduled medical, vision, and dental appointments for clients
  - escorted clients to general and specialist medical appointments
  - acted as liaison between client and staff/medical personnel
- Health information:**
  - provided individualized education for clients with specific health concerns and conditions
  - organized translated health materials
  - answered questions on an as-needed basis
- Skills for healthy living:**
  - updated health orientation presentation with “Healthy Tips,” such as diet, exercise, and dental health
  - provided interactive oral health education sessions

**•Sustainable programs and materials:**

- piloted cultural orientation walking tour that provides clients with early exposure to important community establishments
- created refugee fact sheets and standard slides to be used and distributed by NSC employees
- completed oral health needs assessment to assist NSC in better meeting dental needs of clients

**•Understanding of the refugee experience:**

- read research materials pertaining to refugee health
- interacted with clients and asked culturally sensitive questions
- listened to clients’ needs, requests, and stories



## Oral Health Needs Assessment

To gain a better understanding of the oral health of NSC clients, the students conducted a general needs assessment. A 22-question survey was constructed and students obtained a list of clients who have resettled in Philadelphia since May 2012.

The questions addressed the following:

- past frequency of dental visits
- past dental habits
- current use of US dental services
- current dental habits
- self-perceived barriers to dental care
- fears of dental visits
- knowledge of healthy habits
- dental habits of children (if applicable)



**Results:**

- 30 responses
  - 16 Bhutanese, 5 Burmese, 5 Sudanese, 4 Iraqi
- 73% of respondents had never been to the dentist prior to arrival in US
- 70% have not had a follow-up visit
- 50% stated that there has been a time since arriving in the US that they have needed dental care but could not get it
- 33% of respondents have fears about going to the dentist
- 43% do not know what floss is and do not use it
- 60% of participants with children stated that their children had never seen a dentist prior to arrival in US

**Recommendations:**

- For NSC health team:
- Provide interactive examples during health orientation presentation
  - If clients have children, emphasize pediatric dental care and habits
  - Address fears and concerns

- For dental care providers:
- Emphasize preventative care
  - Ensure interpreter services are easily accessible
  - Be aware of betel nut use among Burmese and Bhutanese populations

## Reflections

Both students are thankful for the opportunity to have shared experiences with members of the refugee community in Philadelphia. Highlights include patient education, interactive sessions, and satisfaction in serving clients in their transition to America. Both feel a desire to serve populations with similar needs in their future practice. The experience has equipped each with practical skills, such as using a phone interpreter, along with increased cultural awareness and camaraderie that will be of great benefit to their professional careers.

Refugee Population in Philadelphia by Location

