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PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

# Their past was a nightmare. For many refugees, the Dream Center offers hope.



Lindsey McGinnis/The Christian Science Monitor

Omar Bah and Teddi Jallow, both Gambian refugees, founded the Refugee Dream Center in 2015 to support people escaping violence and persecution.

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Teddi Jallow's clients often call her "mama," or "Mama Dream." Or sometimes just "sister."

In many ways, she and her husband, Omar Bah, are like family to the 300 refugees they serve at the Refugee Dream Center in Providence, Rhode Island.

Founded in 2015, the center provides case management services to people who have fled violence or persecution, and runs programs that focus on health, youth mentoring, and adult education. But the couple also want to make sure Rhode Island refugees have a place to turn when they run into trouble.

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### WHY WE WROTE THIS

*After the standard 90 days of federal assistance ends, many refugees in the U.S. are still finding their footing. Founded by refugees, the Dream Center offers support and compassion – and for many, a sense of family.*

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Maybe they need a ride to the hospital, they can't pay their electric bill, or their child is being bullied at school. The Dream Center's approach mixes compassion with pragmatism: It will give them a ride, provide some cash, set up a meeting with the guidance counselor.

"We try to fix the problem," says Ms. Jallow. "We always talk about problems, but how do we fix it?"

Mr. Bah escaped Gambia in 2007, and Ms. Jallow joined him in Providence three years later. As refugees themselves, Mr. Bah and Ms. Jallow understand how long it takes to rebuild a life from scratch.

In the United States, the government promises 90 days of assistance after arrival. Refugees can seek further aid from state programs, but that varies depending on the person's location and individual circumstances. The process is geared toward rapid self-sufficiency.

Mr. Bah and Ms. Jallow aim to fill the gaps, offering not only immediate problem-solving but also long-term support so refugees can thrive in the U.S., even as fewer and fewer are being accepted. It's like having an aunt or uncle in your new neighborhood – an anchor.

“The government gets refugees set up, the refugee resettlement agency is responsible for helping them navigate all of these transitions, and then refugees are enrolled in some sort of public benefits system, but that's all time sensitive,” says Danielle Grigsby, interim director of Refugee Council USA, a national coalition of refugee advocates. “And while that ticks boxes – like rent, housing, job, school – we all know that life is so much more than that.”

## What it means to be a refugee

In Gambia, Mr. Bah and Ms. Jallow only had two months together as newlyweds before Mr. Bah went on the run. As a political journalist, he was often at odds with the country's authoritarian regime. He says he was nearly beaten to death by security forces on a reporting trip and lost his popular newspaper column during an editor turnover. When the government discovered he'd continued publishing stories online under a pseudonym, it issued a warrant for his arrest.

“I had a dictator who had a price over my head, literally announced my name and picture over the TV,” he says. Mr. Bah barely made it to Ghana alive.

After a year in limbo, he was placed in Providence. Mr. Bah was the only refugee from Gambia in the city when he arrived, and he was afraid to interact with Gambian Americans due to his wanted status.

Lindsey McGinnis/The Christian Science Monitor

Isabel Kayembe (from left), Teddi Jallow, and Astou Lo meet with staff at Nathan Bishop Middle School on February 21, 2020, in Providence, Rhode Island. With the help of the Refugee Dream Center, Ms. Lo's daughter is able to transfer schools.

But his loneliness began to subside as he met refugees from other countries. His English and computer skills meant he could help file paperwork and advocate for better housing.

“That’s how I built my community,” says Mr. Bah. “That became my life.”

Since he arrived, more than 2,000 refugees have been placed in Rhode Island, including Ms. Jallow, who arrived in 2010. Mr. Bah noticed that even one or two years after their arrival, refugees were failing to integrate – they were still struggling with English, overwhelmed by bills, feeling isolated.

That’s why the couple founded the Dream Center, a nonprofit that could serve the needs of Rhode Island’s refugees after the government aid period ended. Mr. Bah deals with most of the outward-facing business, including fundraising, meeting with officials, and educating the public about refugees. Ms. Jallow focuses on the clients.

She works closely with Isabel Kayembe, the center’s case manager and a refugee from Angola, to make sure clients get the assistance they need. Together, they speak nine languages. Even amid the current health crisis, the Dream Center has continued looking out for its clients, with staff members making daily rounds to deliver food and household supplies and provide translation services.

Although temporarily closed to slow the spread of the coronavirus, their shared office space is typically packed. Staff and visitors step around boxes of donated coats, while volunteers conduct English as a second language classes in an adjacent room. As Mr. Bah returns from a meeting, Ms. Jallow and Ms. Kayembe are piling into a minivan, off to pick up Astou Lo, who came to the U.S. 10 years ago after fleeing ethnic violence in Mauritania.

Recently, Ms. Lo noticed her daughter’s grades were slipping, and she relied on the Dream Center to obtain an individualized education program and eventually transfer her daughter to a better school. During a meeting to finalize the switch, Ms. Jallow came prepared with questions and translated while Ms. Kayembe took notes. Ms. Lo left the building with the counselor’s contact information, a Monday morning game plan, and a sense of relief. She’s known Ms. Jallow and Mr. Bah since she arrived in the U.S., but she was especially happy to have them in her corner that day.

“I’m so grateful I have someone I trust,” she says with the help of a Dream Center interpreter. “I could not do this alone.”

# Family reunions on hold

Laurent Tumba has been coming to the Dream Center for more than two years after escaping conflict in Congo. He's worked with several resettlement agencies, but nothing beats Ms. Jallow and Mr. Bah for immediate assistance. "[Other groups] help, but they help on their own time," he says through an interpreter. "It's not like here."

But even the Dream Center has its limits.

Many refugees, including Mr. Tumba, are waiting for relatives to join them in the U.S. But since the Trump administration halved refugee admissions in 2019, reunification has slowed to a crawl.

"They are not coming. There's nothing we can tell them," says Ms. Jallow.

Combined with travel bans targeting African countries that clients may pass through on their way to the U.S., Ms. Jallow says the government has effectively stopped the flow of refugees into the U.S. In the meantime, the Dream Center focuses on improving the lives of its clients. Ms. Jallow hopes that one day, they stop needing the center.

"I want to see them move forward," she says, "get jobs, know English, be able to do things for themselves."



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