

BUSINESS, HEALTH

Refugee Dream Center gives support to hundreds of Rhode Island's refugees



by Ana Gonzalez

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Being on the phone all day with refugees is not unusual for Omar Bah, the founder of the Refugee Dream Center. His phone rings constantly. He and his wife Teddi get calls about jobs, food, housing, interpreters—the list is long.

Most of the families who get help from the Refugee Dream Center are from the Congo, Somalia, and Syria. The life of a refugee adjusting to living in the United States is already hard, but the Coronavirus pandemic compounds that. “They are people who are looking for ways to settle down, to adjust to a new life that they were not prepared for,” Omar said. “And now there is a 2.0. Even staying home is probably harder for them than the average population.”

Refugees in the United States get some cash and medical assistance from the federal government and resettlement agencies, but getting basic, reliable information is a hurdle, especially during a crisis that requires physical isolation. A lot of refugees still rely on news and information from their home countries because they're not comfortable speaking in English, and misinformation is a huge issue. Not only are those news sources not relevant to people living in the United States, they are also not necessarily reliable. “A lot of people get information such as, you know, false treatment, like eating garlic,” Omar explained. “Or a lot of information that we know is not recommended.” To combat this, Omar and his staff tell refugees the facts: there is no cure yet, but the government is looking for it, and there is no hope.

Another problem is that refugees spend a lot of time with their extended families. It's their main support system.



family spending the whole day together. But it's also important for refugees to know that they are not alone in this.

Being a refugee is an incredibly isolating and traumatizing experience. Most refugees have witnessed or been victims of extreme violence. They are starting a life in a new country, a new language, and a new culture. And now, that new world is also going through a crisis. Omar, who is a former refugee, knows firsthand the isolation experienced by refugees. "Something like this happens, it is very easy for somebody to be further isolated, further re-traumatized and also just stay without knowing how to reach out for help. There is a perfect combination of psychological challenges and real life situations where people need to know who to call or how to get help."

The Refugee Dream Center is doing its best to support the needs of all of the refugee families it serves. But the Center is not equipped to provide food and cleaning supplies to the hundreds of refugees all over the state who cannot afford to buy items in bulk or who are scared to compromise their health by going to a grocery store. That's why, after a week of receiving panicked calls from families, Omar, Teddi and a few of their caseworkers started buying supplies for refugee families out of their own pockets and delivering them to refugees' homes in their own cars. Omar says the supplies were limited, so they started by calling the 20 families in the most need to arrange a drop-off time. Over the phone, there were screams of excitement from families who "were just stuck" at home with no idea what to do.

The Refugee Dream Center has started an online fundraising campaign and teamed up with local food banks and charitable organizations to help meet the needs of the families they serve. In the past week, they raised close to \$5,000. Omar says that will cover the costs of buying and delivering supplies for each of the 125 families they serve, for at least a few weeks.

To learn more about American immigration experiences, check out [Mosaic](#), our podcast on immigration.

