

Immigrant group works to help newcomers integrate in America

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When Congolese immigrants arrive for an appointment at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, there often is a Swahili-speaking translator there to help them if needed.

But sometimes communications still can break down.

Congolese Swahili is different from the Tanzanian and Kenyan Swahili spoken by many

translators, said board members of the CongoReform Association, a local group comprised mostly of East African immigrants. The organization's members work to help new arrivals to the Corridor find jobs, enroll their children in school and otherwise integrate into Iowa life.

And the group is having integration problems of its own. Building connections and connecting with resources has proved a challenge. Members are trying to raise awareness of their group and the issues community members face, from translation challenges to helping their children with their homework.

History

The CongoReform Association started as a network of immigrants helping immigrants. Association Executive Director Boumedién Kasha arrived in Iowa in 2003, when there were only a handful of Congolese families in the Corridor.

The community has grown exponentially since then.

Today, community leaders estimate there are around 500 families spread between Iowa City and Cedar Rapids. Immigrants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan and South Sudan have formed substantial communities as well.



Many of the Congolese community members come from refugee camps in Tanzania, where they lived for years after fleeing violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

For most, Iowa was not their first stop in the United States. Families often decide to relocate to Iowa after the federal government settles them in places such as New York City or Los Angeles because Iowa has available jobs, low cost of living, good schools and low crime rates.

Often, an individual arrives, then sends for family members and tell friends in other states - thus the community grows.

Community members who have been here longer hold valuable skills - they've had time to learn English, secure driver's licenses, make connections with employers and scope out housing options.

They call themselves "pathfinders" - the ones who forged the way. Those pathfinders have taken it on themselves to help newer arrivals.

"We said, it's our people. Let's help each other," Kasha said.

When they get word someone new is heading to Iowa, CongoReform Association members arrange pickup at the airport or bus station, inviting them to sleep on their couches and floors while helping them look for housing. Established community members gather basic living necessities such as mattresses and dishes to get families started.

They set up job interviews and doctor's appointments and provide translation services with school officials and immigration lawyers. They help them sign up for English-language classes, secure driver's licenses and open bank accounts. Sometimes they raise money from each other to help a family in financial need.

All of this was happening informally until recently, when community members decided to get organized. The association now has federal and state non-profit 501(c) 3 status.

Group members hope they can use the status to apply for grant funding and to build up connections with outside institutions. They'd like to do more to send resources - medical supplies and money - back to the DRC as well.

For now, they collect \$30 a month from members to keep operations afloat.

Seeking to grow

A group of 10 association board members met March 20 with Coralville Mayor John Lundell and Iowa State Rep. Art Staed, a Democrat representing the district that includes portions of Cedar Rapids.

Those are exactly the kinds of connections the board is hoping to build, and members are working to connect with other elected officials and institutions.

They have a simple message - we're here and we want to be part of your community. As relative newcomers to the town, state and country, they're hoping the community's leaders can help show them how.

"We know there are resources, we just don't know how to get them," board member Edmond Zigaba said.

A primary need, the board said, is finding free or cheap office space. They would like a place where people can drop in and that they can use for grant applications. Somewhere with a dedicated phone number that is not Kasha's cellphone.

Right now a volunteer is working to build them a website, but for now the association has neither a physical nor virtual location, which makes it hard to connect with the wider community.

In addition to meeting with elected officials, board members hope to connect with people in charge of translation services at area hospitals to address their concerns. They'd also like to have a designated point of contact in the Iowa City Community School District - someone in a role similar to the intercultural specialist position the Cedar Rapids Community School District has, where Rama Muzo, himself an immigrant who speaks Swahili, interfaces between the district and families.

There are issues school staff simply might not think about, board members noted, such as the inability to help children with homework in a new language or to read a letter sent home by a teacher.

The community is looking for a hand up, not a hand out, Kasha emphasized.

"Most of the new arrivals are getting a job, and after getting a job they are self-reliant," he said.

Many have gained American citizenship, board member Jean Paul Mugemuzi added. They want to be fully part of American life.

'Education is needed, education about voting. They want to know where and how to vote,' he said. 'People want to know their rights as Americans.'

Building connections

Lundell and Staed said the discussion with the association was an eye-opener, and they promised to work on the group's behalf.

'This meeting has been very helpful because now I have these issues in my head,' Lundell told them. 'I'll try to see what I can do. I'll try to be your ambassador.'

He promised to make a declaration at a future Coralville City Council meeting recognizing World Refugee Day on June 20. He said he liked the idea of a community celebration on that day, to help Coralville meet its new neighbors.

'I think it starts with organizing activities where we get to know each other in friendly ways,' he said.

He and Staed both agreed to reach out to their contacts in search of an office space. Lundell suggested area chambers of commerce might have ideas.

Staed said he would check with contacts in government and at the University of Iowa. He also promised to introduce them to other lawmakers.

'I would like to help you if I can,' he said. 'Networking and connections would be helpful.'

Staed said building communications would benefit everyone involved, both Congolese and American.

'We really need to know about your culture, too. That exchange enriches all of us,' he said.

Want to get involved?

The CongoReform Association seeking community partners. To get involved or learn more about the group, contact Tom Sandersfeld at (319) 521-4633 or tsandersfeld@ilt.org or Boumedien Kasha at (319) 651-2917 or sasakasha4@hotmail.com.