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Refugee workforce

Thousands of refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East are building new lives in WNY. As they deal with a new culture and language, many, like Steve Bareka, are working their way into the job market.



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[Steve Bareka](#) had nothing when he arrived in Buffalo.

He was 22 years old. He spoke no English. He was alone.

Three years later, the young Congolese man with an easy smile is a cook at the Original Pancake House. He was initially hired as a dishwasher.

Now he works full time, six days a week, driving from the West Side to the restaurant on Niagara Falls Boulevard. Someday he would like to go to college, but right now he's happy to be able to pay his bills.

"I like it," said Bareka, who lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania for five years before coming to Buffalo. "It's a good job."

He is among the throng of refugees who have fled their home countries for political and religious reasons and settled in Buffalo. In 2012 alone, 1,036 refugees came to Buffalo, placed here by the U.S. government. The largest groups hailed from Burma, Bhutan, Iraq and Somalia, according to data from the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

Four local agencies support new refugees as soon as they land in Buffalo: Journey's End Refugee Services Inc., Catholic Charities of Buffalo, **Jewish Family Service of Buffalo** and Erie County and the International Institute of Buffalo. Food, housing and other necessities are immediately provided.

Then, typically, refugees enroll in English language classes and begin looking for work. The wages help refugees pay back travel loans from the U.S. government and, ideally, get off public assistance.

But the job hunt can be difficult. Many work-eligible refugees – defined as those between the ages of 18 and 64 – speak little or no English. Most are unfamiliar with American workplace culture. And degrees or certificates earned previously are usually nontransferable in the United States.

So they start over. That's what [Dil Mangar](#), 20, and San Biswa, 35, are doing.

Both Bhutanese men arrived in Buffalo in November – Mangar with his wife and Biswa with his wife and five children. Now they are looking for entry-level jobs in any industry.

They're getting help from Journey's End, where they are learning to speak English and taking vocational courses. [Jeff Ogilvie](#) is the agency's employment services coordinator.

He said he works regularly with 75 to 100 companies in Western New York that call him when they have positions to fill. He then tries to match refugees to specific jobs, most often in hotels, restaurants and manufacturing plants.

"From A to Z, that's where we're placing people," Ogilvie said. "The goal is to be self-sufficient."

Three years ago, he called [Larry Szrama](#) of Landies Candies Sweets & Treats to ask if Szrama would consider hiring refugees to work in his Buffalo chocolate factory. Szrama said yes and he's been hiring refugees through the agency ever since.

"They're phenomenal," he said of the eight refugees he employs. "They're appreciative, they're dependable (and) they show up on time."

Those qualities are mentioned by others who have hired refugees. [Jay Dellavecchia](#), general manager of the Hyatt Regency Buffalo, uses the terms "dependable," "grateful" and "humble" to describe the 20-something refugees he employs. They make \$7.50 to \$10.50 an hour, depending on the job.

Before Dellavecchia took over day-to-day operations of the 396-room hotel, the Hyatt worked with temp agencies to fill open positions.

But training issues – namely, having to continuously train temp employees every time the hotel needed extra hands – forced Dellavecchia to find another way to staff the hotel. He contacted the International Institute to see if the agency could connect him to workers.

Today, refugees make up nearly half of the Hyatt's 50-person housekeeping staff. They are full-time employees who receive benefits, one of them is now a cook and all of them were referred by the International Institute.

In 2012, the agency placed 92 refugees in jobs, primarily in hospitality and manufacturing, according to [Eve Williams Wilson](#), job developer. Halfway through 2013, it has already placed more than 80 refugees in jobs, she said.

Often the jobs are starting points, an avenue to establishing job history in the United States. Some refugees eventually go back to school. Some earn degrees or get promoted. Others start their own businesses.

[Eva Hassett](#), executive director of the institute, said refugees are critical to Buffalo's future – not just as population boosters but as workers who can help fill the estimated 17,000 manufacturing job vacancies anticipated in the region between now and 2020.

"We need to make sure that refugees and immigrants are thought about as in-migration, not out," Hassett said. "This is a force to be reckoned with. These people want to work."

The agencies work hard to build relationships with local employers in order to put refugees to work. Catholic Charities of Buffalo, which on average resettles 600 refugees a year, works with 30 to 40 employers.

Employment counselor [Winnie Vu](#) compared the process of finding new employers to selling a product. The product, in this case, is the work-ready refugee.

"The employers, they don't know my client yet," Vu said. "So I need to sell the product. I try and try to get them to take just one client."

Once jobs are secured, refugees have to find a way to get there. Most, at least initially, must rely on public transportation, which gets tricky for evening, night and weekend shifts.

In general, transportation is a headache, even more so than language, said [Marlene Schillinger](#), president and CEO of Jewish Family Service. Her agency tries to match workers to jobs where "language skills aren't high on the list" of qualifications.

Fortunately, Aye Lay's commute to the Hyatt is 11 minutes by bus. The 38-year-old Burmese mother of three is a housekeeper at the downtown hotel, a world away from the 15 years she spent in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Last year, she won an Employee of the Month award for dedication to her job, which she obtained two years ago through the International Institute.

That same work ethic is visible in the refugees that [Dan King](#) hired to staff the kitchen at the Buffalo Club. To date, he has hired eight refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, all of whom were resettled by Journey's End.

Some of those employees are enrolled in school. Language skills are improving and King said he is able to have "full-blown" conversations with them.

"They come in and take what they do and do it very seriously," he said. "They're happy to be working. They're grateful to be working."

Allissa Kline covers financial services, accounting and trade