



IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE  
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

MISSION:

TO PROMOTE THE INTEGRATION OF  
REFUGEES, IMMIGRANTS, AND THE  
COMMUNITY AT LARGE INTO A SELF-  
SUFFICIENT, HEALTHY, AND INCLUSIVE  
MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY.

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Dear Chair Riley, Vice-Chair Giroud, and Senators Dembrow, Hass, and Olsen:

I'd like to thank you and the entire committee for the opportunity to testify today in support of the Senate Bill 855. My name is Bisera Vucak, and I graduated from Medical School in Sarajevo, Bosnia in 1986. After graduating, I practiced medicine for three years. In July of 1992 I came to the United States as a refugee from former Ugoslavia. At the time, it was safest for me and my children to leave right away. This meant coming to Vancouver, Washington without knowing when or if my husband or other family members would be able to join us. When I started applying to jobs, I understood that I could not return to medicine without a medical license. As a refugee, I had no money to pay exam fees or go back to school. I knew I had to work until my husband could arrive, which ended up being two years later. I struggled to find a job because the only experience on my resume was from a different country in the field of healthcare. I applied to everything, including factory jobs and store cashier positions, but was told I was overqualified. I finally learned about a CNA position that opened up at a retirement facility, and was excited by the prospect of returning, in any capacity, to my field. However, when I applied I was told I still needed a CNA license from the U.S., despite my training as a doctor. I begged for them to give me a chance to show my skills and knowledge, but they insisted I had to go to school again, take the test, and get a license. I could not afford to do this. With no other options, I applied to a production job at a company that made computer chips.

For eight months I worked long hours filling up computer tray boards and loading them into machines for testing. Every day I felt lost, but my children were my motivation. I was determined to give them a better life than the one I had. I felt emotionally depleted and had a lack of confidence in myself and in my future. I realized I needed a job that was not physically demanding. I had to take Advil every afternoon in order to be able to stand for ten hours straight on my feet. After work, I studied English by myself while watching my young children in the evening. I tried to apply to a Nursing training program for foreign professionals through Clackamas Community College, with the hope that I could get back to doing what I loved. Whatever was required to be a Nurse, I knew I could do it. However, they also denied me from the program. They said they did not accept doctors. I was devastated, my heart was more than broken. I could not understand why it was OK for a doctor to be a production worker but not a Nurse. After long days at work, I volunteered overnight in the free clinics in the Health Department in Vancouver, hoping one day someone would give me an opportunity. While nothing came of it, I did teach myself enough English to pass an interpreter exam and become a Medical Interpreter at



DHS. I found IRCO through my sister-in-law who at the time was working as a Career Coach. I applied to an Assessment Specialist position in the New Arrival program and was offered the job in December of 2000. Still today, IRCO is one of the few agencies willing to hire refugees with no U.S. work experience, as they believe in their potential and are determined to give them a chance.

Nineteen years later, I am a Program Coordinator for four employment training programs in the Refugee Employment Services Department at IRCO. Even after all the employment cases I've opened over the years, I still feel sad every time a client tells me they used to be an engineer, a scientist, or a doctor. I hide my sadness from them so that I can continue to support them to the best of my ability, and so that they won't lose hope. But I know how difficult, if not impossible, it will be for them to return to their field in the U.S. In the past I felt like helping them find survival jobs was setting them up for failure, as I knew that working long hours would make it very difficult to return to the place they once were in their careers. I want to see the creation of reasonable, short-term pathways for newcomer professionals in all fields. We understand the regulations, the law, and that many things are different, and are determined to learn them as long as someone gives us a chance. I've been waiting twenty-seven years to see type of movement towards changing the system. When I read this bill, I feel proud about what we have accomplished. I believe this bill is a starting place, and we need so much more. I want to see the future generation of skilled workers be recognized with much less trauma. They are also dreaming of a good life, of freedom, of safety. Like everyone, if you are happy and safe then you can be more productive. I'd also like to see our state invest in newcomers by providing some type of support or assistance to families with parents pursuing career pathways, so that they can survive while learning and working their way back to self-sufficiency.

Thank you for your time,

Bisera Vucak