



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 Committee Members,

I am speaking with you today to advocate for a proposal that would make Oregon a truly welcoming place for immigrants and refugees, and is, at its heart, a matter of equity. When we think of immigrants and refugees leaving their homelands, we think of them leaving their homes and families behind. What we do not often think about is the careers they leave behind too: engineers walking away from drafting tables, doctors away from the hospitals, and lawyers away from the courthouses. I want each of you to imagine yourselves in the situation many of IRCO's clients find themselves in: far, far from home, away from a culture and language that is familiar and comfortable, and bills, so many bills to pay and be responsible for. It is so much, so fast, it is all too easy to be overwhelmed. If you were in this situation, what would be your first move to stabilize yourself and your family? The answer for many of our clients is to get a survival job, enough to pay the bills. But for all of our clients, not only did they not come to America just to pay bills, they came here to reclaim their lives. Before too long, many of our clients are looking to regain their lost careers that were left behind in their homeland to escape a lifetime of poverty wages and to give their children a brighter tomorrow. Would you do any different in their situation?

I have seen client after client come to service sites with high hopes of reclaiming their careers and stabilize their families by going to school in America, brushing up on the basics, learning new standards, and resuming their livelihoods. Without fail, nearly each and every time when we submit their transcripts comes the response: "Your career is amazing, you obviously have strong experience. Unfortunately, the only way you can get certified is to go back to school, to the beginning, and start again." In this brief response we see the paradox of our professional accreditation system in America: we are impressed with immigrants' professional experience, but we are unwilling or unable to move aside and let them bring that experience into our communities, to build our communities, nourish them, and make them stronger. I will be honest: there are days where I question if all we are doing is transferring people from one dire situation to another when we insist on keeping extraordinary people from reaching their full potential, and instead relegate them to a life of living paycheck-to-paycheck supplemented by public assistance while the rest of Oregon suffers from not having their skills deployed in the workforce as hardworking taxpayers. This zero-sum game is easy to reverse, we just need the will to do it.

I want to tell you the story of my old co-worker Zaid. I met Zaid through IRCO and before long he asked me for help with his applications to dentistry programs. Zaid was an accomplished dentist from Iraq, and so badly wanted to continue his career in his new country. But, like so many others I have described, the schools in Oregon told him to start again, at the age of 35, in Biology 101. Recognizing his own worth and acknowledging his family could not wait years and years for him to complete school, Zaid began applying to re-entry programs around the country. Zaid faced down so many challenges on his path to finally getting accepted into the dentistry program at the University of Illinois Chicago, it was head spinning. For Zaid, who once recounted to me how he was forced to conduct oral surgery on an insurgent in Baghdad at gunpoint, this was all part of a continuing story of perseverance, another set of obstacles on his way to getting his family to safety and stability.



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But I want to ask you esteemed committee members why Oregon is okay with being considered the, “next obstacle,” on people’s pathways to self-sufficiency. I have seen in my time in Oregon the awesome abilities and resources its people can bring to bear on a problem. I have seen firsthand and often the warmhearted, generous nature of Oregonians as they welcome newcomers to this remarkable state. I have seen Oregonians eager to show immigrants their state, and eager to learn all they can of the experiences these new Oregonians bring with them. I therefore see zero reason why we should not have state policies that reflect the values of its people: open and welcoming, guiding and eager to benefit from each other’s lived experiences.

This exchange is possible. We at IRCO have been ecstatic to see our clients in the Immigrant Nurse Credentialing program go through their program, graduate, pass their boards, and obtain nursing jobs. After only one year of operation, this very unique program that offers Oregon’s immigrant nurses their only viable re-entry option has graduated 15 participants. Of those 15, 8 have passed their boards on their first attempt, and of those 8, 5 have gotten jobs so far, with another in final interviews. Put in context, the 8 nurses of 15 that passed on their first try is nearly twice the national rate for immigrant nurses attempting the board test. To put a human face to these numbers, I want to tell you about my client who just got a nurse position with a detox clinic. Not only is she and her family now self-sufficient thanks to her starting salary of \$38 an hour, but she will now be paying taxes in this state that gave her so much. Also consider that she will be helping those stricken with addiction, a service I think we can all agree here is much needed in our state.

In conclusion, I want to tell you that I have worked with refugees in three states now. I have seen the hardship immigrants of all stripes face in America. I have seen how even the most brave, resourceful, and hardworking immigrants have been stymied at every turn by a system that does not acknowledge their abilities, and refuses to grant them a way forward toward economic independence. I have seen how many Albert Einsteins, Steve Chens, Madeline Albrights, Sigmund Freuds, and Sergey Brins are out there. Lastly, I want to remind you how this state, Oregon, our home, stands apart in its stance on immigrants and refugees. That said, we can always be better, we can always do better, and this is our chance to take a massive step toward being better.

