

KATHY COLEMAN: Welcome, everyone. This is Dis/Representation, and this is a program of the Disability Art and Culture Project. Tonight, we're really lucky to have Abdi and Saara here to do a presentation on refugees with disabilities and some of the systemic issues that are happening in our community and probably others around services and accommodations and access.

SAARA HIRSI: Hello, everyone. Thank you. Thank you so much for coming. And we like to listen our story and what we like to do for awareness about the refugee with disability. So, my name is Saara Hirsi, and I'm a student still Portland State University getting my Master of Social Work. And I really come this country not knowing any English. So, I started ESOL in PCC, is was Cascade was my PCC big time. So, and now I'm doing my Master in PSU. So, what we like to share with you is the journey and how really, really challenges it is about for us as a second language and plus with a disability to get these resources when you are struggling and when you wanna make a life this country and how really tough is to go that places. So, we like to talk about that. So, Abdi?

ABDI MOHAMED: Thank you, Saara. Welcome, everyone. Thank you for coming and listening our story and how to be disabled and refugee and immigrant in this country. So, my name is Abdi Mohamed.

I was born and grew up in Somalia, and I came this country in 2009 with very limited English. And I had the dream that every immigrant and refugee came this country has. So, achieving that dream was not easy because of my disability and the other challenges that every refugee who came in this country go through. Plus, but I have to work as many five, ten times than non-disabled refugee and immigrant. So, that dream achieving, I have to work very hard, and my English was very limited, lack of. And there was no a lot of services that was helping or designed to refugee with disability.

There was a lot of resources and organizations that help with other non-disabled immigrants, but for disabled refugees, when you come in the country, there's very limited resources to help you achieve your dream. So, I went to PCC, started ESL from the beginning through when I finished ESL, went to college, then transfer to PSU. I just finished my Bachelor this year. And since I go through that journey and that struggle, and Saara went through that. So, we think about what are the disabled who are not working that had and isolated at home? How can they come out and do the same thing?

So, I was member of the—me and Saara, we member of the—Disability Leadership Academy in the City of Portland and Disability Justice for the [Disability Art Culture](#) and [REAL Project](#). We working with the disabled organizations around the state in Oregon, and this is how we wanna work with other disabled people.

So, going through these challenges, there's a lot of disability immigrants and refugees who stay home and children is not getting that education. So, me and Saara, tonight we wanna talk about the challenges they have to go through. So, we will talk about some of the stages that has to go through to be disabled refugee in this country, refugee with disability. So, that's about some of the stages that have to go through is that the individual disability has to, when came this country, came from Africa, there's another identity. But when you came this country, these individuals, they have to understand how they will live. So, Saara, if you wanna talk about how that stage goes.

SAARA: Yeah, mmhmm. We talk about like dividing by three stages, but more than that, but we catch up for three kind. For stage, like you arrive this country, and you just wanna have your

sibling or your other friend or whoever come this country to have the education and job. You work hard, and if you work hard, you can get something. This kind of idea. So, first, you have that dream and those beliefs. And then what happened is, you come, and the cultural organization or disability agencies or community colleges, so difficult to get there in first place.

Number one, you need to know how to navigate for the city or the system and then where you ask help and who you ask help. So, you come with family at the same time, family self are dealing understanding how they can trust their child or their daughter or son to let her go or to become their own individual with a disability. Because where you came from, they didn't have those resources.

So, first we dealing is finding our own strength and what we can do and educating at the same time the community and family you came from, and you wanna be understanding. Those three challenges just have to go through. That's first stage, which is like finding what you can, as an individual with a disability, or you didn't know before exist. Like, if you are blind or different situation, you never had a school, or you never know blind person can take classes or doing something. So, internally, you are fighting with yourself to learn that.

Now, it comes to the family and the community to educate at the same time. Which you also don't know which resources can help you. You don't know how you're gonna get there. Everything you blame in your eyes if you don't do it because you can't see it, which is so hard to know what you can, what you have right to know, and what possible. How you speak yourself. Who will speak for you? Because the community and the family you came from don't know where they can go, and it's hard for anyone to advocate for you. That's the first huge challenges.

So, this is where people, then some people, will isolate at home, and some people will filling up and filling up to go to get the first to learn the language. Talk about second.

ABDI: Yeah. As saying, coming with the challenges. Community is a big thing also. We come from, back home, a culture where you have to— Being disabled is nothing there. You have to stay home. You don't have the right to go to school. There is no resources that help you even if your family— Actually, every parent or every individual in your family loves you, but in this society, there's nothing help you go out. And sometimes, it's a shame, not just the accessibility outside, but also in the family. So, when we came this country, still that mindset in that community still existed.

So, in that family, if they don't get support— Because me and Saara work with so many children who don't have any even resources. They stay home. They go to school, but there is no resources that help. Some of the children have developmental disability, and they think, the teachers in the school, they have bad behavior. Then they suspend them. They stay home. So, in that community, it's very hard to overcome. So, and the systems not help you also.

SAARA: So, then it comes here understanding what the system. For example, the high school children who has developmental disability, which they're really good this different area like art and other things. But after they finish Transition program, they all stay home. No next steps. 20 years old, 21, is so young, and they can do a lot. But the parents don't know where they can go. And any case manager of social work, if you don't talk, and you don't ask what you needed, they will not let you know where you can get the resources you needed.

And any time for children going to high school also, the struggle they're going through is for the IEP plan, Individual Education Plan, they don't know what works. For the assessment, if it's like

children who born here, they might do more than the way the assessment does because this assessment is based on child who born here, whose first language will be English. So, they might put the child— That child is struggling two thing: Culture adjustment and the language barrier and his own developmental disability. So, now it's really hard for even what a school have resources to a child to get the education they needed. So, they will say, what's the point to go in school? And also, they spending all the time, which is hard for them to go behind for their peer going to school.

And the other thing is they don't fit regular classes, and sometimes physically, or they don't fit the other special school. Then now comes the confusion here, and it's so hard for them to have the resources they needed. So, it's hard between the teachers and the parents to communicate for that. That is one area we work, Abdi and I, to educate for the school and the parents to do parents in training and tell them the school's not the only work. We also have to come up plan to support those children.

So, agency helps with disability: If you don't speak English, how they gonna help you? For interpreter. Interpreter will be other challenges 'cause the interpreter, they only have a limit money to help you. And then you cannot learn in those short time. The solution.

ABDI: Yeah, for not only children who isolate at home also. Those disabled adults when they came here as adults, they have that dream every immigrant or refugees who came this country. So, they wanna get a job. They wanna get education. They wanna get all that. But those organizations who work with the disability, who work with the refugees [like IRCO](#), [like Catholic Charities](#), or other organizations who bring people as a refugee here. When you come in this country, you have to go a process. There is a resettlement agency such as Catholic Charities or Lutheran [or SOAR](#), those are the biggest three organizations here. They bring you here. They connect you with IRCO, but the other refugees who came with you has to go to training, employment trainings, and IRCO there are some classes where refugees have to go and get trainings. They teach you how to take the buses, how to apply jobs. It's all about until you get a job.

So, when you are disabled, there's nothing in those organizations. They only thing you have to get is they can help you to apply SSI. You apply SSI, then you stay home. So, we have that dream everyone has, but not just the \$600 or \$700 SSI, then you can even pay rent to that. Then you stay home. It doesn't— So, a lot of folks, adults, are isolate home. They just sit home doing nothing. They depend in interpreters every clinic or everywhere they go. They don't come ESL classes. You don't see a lot of disabled folks are refugees who coming in PCC or the ESL classes or community college because they don't, they just isolate home. They stay home, and they don't work.

Those of us who say no, we can't stay home, has to work very hard. We had a lot of challenges coming to PCC and going to ESL classes and through college. So, finishing college, you don't get easily a job. I just graduate this year, and I still looking for a job. Saara graduated couple years back for her in undergrad. Then, when she couldn't find a job, she has to go back to school for grad, which is very hard to get now. And so, it's very challenging. And those of us who has the courage and very hard working can do that, but a lot of folks who can't speak English is still there, staying home, and they just isolate.

SAARA: Yeah. So, for the ESOL, like when you wanna take for ESOL classes, at least you need to know how you write your name and the basic thing. Because you have to take the test to go which level you are. So, most refugee people who live with a disability who live in camps, they never had the opportunity to go there, or they was born in a refugee, that will be hard for

them to have that opportunity. Because if they under 18, they will never have the opportunity to go for the— Because if you under 20, you go public school, which they do like they match your age for classes. But if you are 21 and disabled, then you done. You know, you are no hope anymore. No public school. And how you gonna to PCC? What will look like for you to take those classes?

So, what we think about, Abdi and I, we thought we not only struggling the system for ourself to understand or to educate the system, like how we get what we needed. We also have to educate our own community leader and culture and those things, the community centers or cultural organization. So, we found an organization that helped for the refugee, the community. Then we started doing for English classes so then we can help people at least to know how to write their name and how to do it so they can go PCC to apply for PCC. So, Abdi is working that area a lot. Can you tell more?

ABDI: Yeah. That was something, a solution we think, me and Saara, just that we struggle, and we came all way here. So, what can we change in the future generation? This struggle is not gonna go all the time. We did that challenges, and what can we change? We just think about that. So, we started working with an organization, and it's a small community. It's called [AYCO: African Youth Community Organization](#).

SAARA: And we partner with Portland.

ABDI: Yeah, so we start to working there. We started there and Disability Project. When I was in school, Saara created that project, the Disability Project, in AYCO, and now this year, when I graduate, I just join with them. And now I'm teaching ESL classes. I'm not a teacher, or just I don't have experience with teaching. But I just think about OK, what can you? You just go through the college, but you can at least teach basic English, the communication. And almost my class, more than half, I can say 80%, have some sort of disability. So, we are teaching them—

SAARA: To go PCC.

ABDI: —to go to PCC or other community college. At least they can learn how to write their names. And most of the students, those I teach, can't even write their name. We has to start at the beginning because back home, they didn't get chance to go to school. They can't even write in their language, not just English. They can't write in Somali also. So, I'm teaching that class, and I teach Wednesday and Thursday. Today was my class day. I teach from 10:30 to 11:30; it's two-hour class for two days. And also, not just that class. We work with the Disability and Healthcare Project, and we get some referrals from Mid-County, Multnomah County Clinic. So, we do assessments and what we can do. Most of them are children who have some sort of disability, developmental disabilities. So, we connect with schools, how they get IEP, an Individual Education Plan.

SAARA: So, what we were thinking was how we still struggle in understanding the system, and we not sure if we can get a job. Even though we work so hard, we still look and everything. But we thought where we are, how we can put the other people, how, at least. And first, we think, is the language is really important. So, if people at least understand the language, they can speak themself and then advocate their self. So, that's what we thought like basic, we can start. But what we struggling is that a lot of people, first of all, don't know for that. There are people who living here who cannot get the basic thing, you know, who cannot have a basic life because of their disability. And we learn that a lot of disabled community even don't know what we talking about. This stuff is not, a lot of people don't know. We also wanna educate for the organization

helps and for how people can get the resources. How can we help so they can get their job easier? So student can go community college or can go those agency help for the disability or developmental disability, these services. Or how people can get those resources. From our challenges is that a lot of the system for us, we learning and we talking it, but we also need support for other people to stand up to advocate for the community, for the refugee with a disability. Because what we talking about, sometimes the people are we talking to about, they think what it look like a lot of people, they don't need it; they just wanna stay home. But that's not the case. People stay home. They isolated because they don't have the resources, because they don't allow an open welcome to do the assess for the resources. So, what we try to achieve tonight is that how this is what we struggling. We also wanna educate the system and the community with a disability community so they can stand up or advocate for those refugee community. And we can help more and help ourself. So, yeah, that's what we like to say. And anything you add, the questions?

ABDI: Yeah. I will add so, the solution is just to not just come one time, but at least there are a lot of resources out there. And there's so many resources for the disability across disability, United States, or the state has. And there's a Blind Commission. There is a Vocational Rehabilitation for disability. There is community colleges who teach English classes. But for this disability refugee folks, it's not easy for them to get that resources out there. And those also, we're trying to educate also those community or cultural organizations or those specific refugee organizations like IRCO and Catholic Charity and all those at least to do something to change. When the refugee come, if the family— Most of the families are refugees who are coming have some disabled in their family, some disabled person. Because they are coming from war-torn countries. And even those who doesn't have physical disabled have some sort of trauma because they come from a war and very terrible countries. So, at least to get some resources to connect other resources. Because we don't have capacity to do everything, but there is resources out there to connect the Vocational Rehabilitation. Me and Saara, we work with AYCO. Those individuals we work with, we just bring out couple people now. There is Abdi. He's not here tonight. We call Abdi 2 [audience laughs] when he's in our group. He was in—

SAARA: Working today.

ABDI: Yeah, he's working today. And he was with the Disability Justice training with us, and he get not a job but a project, which Vocational Rehabilitation connected with. So, we're trying at least to bring out people from home and isolation to connect with other resources. Vocational Rehabilitation, if they can give trainings people, if they can find a job, if they can, or if there's some— Some other folks now we tell to apply in City, the program they call Disability Leadership Academy.

SAARA: But the languages barrier.

ABDI: The language barrier is there. They can't even. If we send people to PCC, they can't just even, they don't speak English, and they can't write even their names. So, even their first level in PCC, you have to understand what the teacher is saying. If you just sit there, and you can't write your name, you have to start A B C and learn how to write the alphabetic. So, in my class now, it's very basic. I am teaching at least basic things. Then, when I connect with it's called [PPT: People—Places—Things](#). Yeah, they teach in libraries. They have classes.

So, I connect with PPT, and I send some of my students to their class in the libraries. They go to Rockwood Library, Midland Library. And any schedule, I try to schedule their classes if there is some folks can go there. It's very basic. And PPT, I went to their trainings, and the way they teach is not PCC teachings. They teach very basic. And there's a lot of, it's all they come from

many different countries, and it's inter-cultural, very good classes. I'm trying instead of those Somali-only speaking classes, I wanna send them to PPT classes in the libraries. Then the other time, they will come to PCC, those big classes. Even the ESL, I think, the Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, it's still you need to know some basic things. The teachers who teach the ESL, it's native speaks English. To understand what they are saying, you have to understand the language first. So, that's what we are trying, and we are bringing people, still trying at least out and connect with PCC and other resources out there.

SAARA: We tell you what we like to tell you. So, we are ready to ask questions.

[music break]

CHERYL GREEN: After the presentation, Saara and Abdi held a Q and A. We've taken out the audience's questions from the recording. What follows here are the answers. You'll have just a brief pause between the answers.

SAARA: So, the different is that somebody, for example, who are deaf, they have to learn the language and the sign language at the same time. So, those kind of resources is so hard when they try to go ESOL classes because in the process, and I think is how they gonna go there? That will be some challenges they face. The second is that if the person doesn't know how to write, sometimes it's so hard to—

First, for IRCO, for example, people stay eight months, and then they get the resources from there to go PCC. So, the PCC, they will not have that opportunity to, first place, to know if they're accepted for to apply for PCC or where they start for find interest. It comes like, you have to come here, register the classes, go the orientation, and you also find out how you gonna get there and go there. So, for the individual with a disability need to know those resources where they can get. For example, if you blind, you need to learn how to take the transportation here, you know. To do that, before you get that, maybe LIFT bus will be accessible. If you don't know where you get the LIFT bus or Ride Connection, those kind of resources, it's so hard for them to know.

So, there is no resources for them to know how you gonna get here and also in how you navigate for the language. Because you have to do extra work to get the resources. You have to take couple steps to get there. So, the place first we come, which is the immigrant area in cultural organization, they will not let you know a lot those kind of thing. And the other thing is that they're not gonna make you easy for you to get those resources because they don't think it's valuable or too much extra work for the case manager to teach for the individual. Because they have to teach everybody for transportation. But the case manager will not take those kind of time a lot to do this work for the extra help that individual needed.

So, now it comes to those barrier will makes difficult for the person to say, "True, I might not learn the language anymore." You wanna add something?

ABDI: OK. I will add only because also, some of the disabled refugees and those non-disabled even, where they came from, refugee camps or the countries, they didn't get the opportunity that non-disabled get. Because if you are disabled back in Africa, you don't go to school. So, then— And when you come here, you just come through resettlement agencies, and they connected you with IRCO, then you go to IRCO. IRCO, they have employment trainings. Those classes they teach through, you have to be someone who ready to work. It's employed only. They teach you how to fill the forms. They just teach you some basic skills, and they make you one case worker who just you take couple weeks of trainings: How to do the resumes and how

to fill the forms when you apply the jobs. Then the other days, OK, we apply this job, and we apply maybe some hotel or cleanings or somewhere. Then the other day, OK, you have job interview.

But if you are disabled, you are not ready that you just came this country now. You are not ready to get a job. And even you can't go through a job because it's not accessible and a lot of things.

OK, you said, "OK, I wanna learn English first before I go and work."

"OK, you are not ready to work then, OK. Just take your SSI and stay home."

They just case your close. The refugees, when they come, they give bus passes, and they connect with—

It's employed, "If you are not ready to job in that time, you don't get bus pass." That's what happened to me. They closed my case the first month.

They said, "You don't get bus pass. OK." Then, they close my case because I was not ready. I was not physical ready employed that time because I wanted to go to college. And so, they close your case. That's one thing that happened.

SAARA: Even if you find the individual to go PCC or work with the PCC [unclear], then they gonna make you difficult to get the bus ticket again, and the person doesn't have resources. I think of one will be the staff lack information how they gonna teach, or they lack training there, like what will be possible. Somebody with a disability can learn anything, that will be something difficult for them to understand. Because most people who work there is also came a background culture different languages. And at the same time, it's like it's hard even if you go there and try to explain that this is possible for the individual to learn, but they're not making easier or allowing or accessible for the individual to be there. One will be the—my understanding is—for the lack of training or understanding about the disability.

SAARA: And the other thing is, those agency, state or county or whoever getting the resources, the people, our problem is they will ask able-bodied to talk about us, you know. And how do they know what we need?

So, they ask the leader who are not disabled, or they will ask, "OK, this to say we are collective culture. This is how we do."

So, they never ask us or listen or talk about what we think they can learn, how we can learn.

And the idea is like, "Oh, you're blind. Everybody blind need the same thing. Everybody this need the same thing."

That kind of philosophy is there also. And my frustration is always was who are they getting the information? Because people who live in the experience, they not listening. And how you gonna do the work if you don't wanna listen and learn? We're not asking you to do a lot of work. We just asking you what you have, how you can include people. You already have the resources and the money, you looking. We just wanna be participated. And we will help you to do that. We would like to work with you to teach you that because we are the one who lived, who knows, who challenge see it, who overcome it, and I think we can do it if you work with us.



ABDI: Talk something a little bit about it. Because one time we met with the organizations to talk about these issues. As you said, they were talking about resources.

"We don't have the resources. We don't have the money to do that."

We said, "We didn't come here to just to create a program which needs a lot of money. We need inclusion. You already have the resources there. We just include those resources. 'Cause you are helping the refugees. Then we are the refugees. You are helping these people, then we need inclusion just to not to create a program for or suppression or maybe segregation."

SAARA: Isolated again [chuckles].

ABDI: Yeah.

SAARA: So, what we saying is that there are organization helping for the refugee. But then it's true, they not working with the disabled people. They don't know how to work with the disability people. We also saying that if we wanna try to connect for the agency, not immigrant or refugee, cultural, for the state or county level here, also is a lack understanding about how they can help somebody who are refugee, you know, how they gonna get the resources. The intake takes forever for the individual to get DDS, for example. The mom will call, and the child behavior; they need a case manager. It takes two years sometimes to get the first step.

And that will be like, "We gonna connect you with interpreter. You have one minute."

If interpreter call you, and you didn't answer, and you leave a message, you don't know how to call back for the parents. They make you appointment. You didn't show up. So, those confusion is there. And then a case manager also don't know how to deal, therefore how to help, how to work with them. What we trying to say is we will let you know how to do this, the easy way, the better way. And your job will be easier, and these people also get to know the resources.

Some people are open mind to, case managers, to hear that, but what we learn all the time is that it will be educational level there, which I think it will make easier for people to participate to get those resources.

SAARA: You know, it's so hard when you work so hard, and you try to get the job. And then, you went there, and the job will be not accessible. Then you feel really, really failure, you know. You can believe that, OK, what's the point for me going this whole process if it's not working, you know? And the communication is the key for people refugee to have the opportunity to understand those basic thing and to learn that, understand, even to know that what you should ask, what is your right even to ask the job? Sometimes we don't know what will be. One thing we do is survivor and work hard, but it's always good to know when you have to know, what is your right, and what do you have to have to succeed?

SAARA: I think most the stuff where we learn is the teachers. The teachers is one who is stand up for us. The teachers who try to learn our style. The teachers is who's the one saw the need we have and how much we really hungry to learn this. And anytime we face challenges, those the teachers who I always, always remember for me because they the one who understood. 'Cause we also come, you know, people come different culture. Like for us, it's oral. It's very oral things. And in English, never follow the grammar. There's no rule for grammar to learn.  
[audience chuckles]



And sometime it's like you have to put your brain organize for the subject, those stuff. And anytime they take the time to learn, if my ESOL teachers, my community teachers, and my Portland State teachers, they not see I have the capacity, I don't think I will be there.

So, the teacher, one thing they can do is— You know, sometime it's like, my surprising was for me, most the stuff I'm learning, I learn for surviving skill. And when I went to the college and studying, this is not what we call this coping [audience laughs] and this. Ah! This same thing. You know, sometimes experiences teaches a lot of thing for people. How we expert our own way, and at the same time, people, teachers taking the time to see and to help you. And that really what makes a big difference. And I think a lot of people even never have handwriting before, and they are really can have that opportunity if the teachers take the time. I know they have to teach a lot of people and too much papers and too much bureaucracy, but that's how we succeeding. Teachers play big role for the success for disabled refugee with student.

SAARA: And yeah, the resources here, if you don't know what to ask, even what are you gonna say when you go there?

You have no idea how many times I hear other student saying, "Oh, you can get this." I didn't know that. Then I can ask!

So, that really is huge for not knowing. And the other thing is if people like agency like that or the organization help with disability wants to know something, the first people they call is the people who don't know this. [audience laughs] And I'm just frustrated! What they gonna say. Nothing.

And they say sometimes people, a lot of other people respect big time, but they will ask me, "Are you serious, you're not gonna see? You don't see?"

And I say, "Last time I know, I don't see it. So, I'm still blind." [audience laughs] "But I can think, [laughs] you know, if you give me chance."

So, the resources is something huge. And attitude also, big thing. If they change just the attitude. We asking something we have right to have it. We not even asking more. We just asking the basic thing. And that cultural organization is the basic thing people came in the beginning if they don't get that motivated there.

And you, how many times, like even if you working hard and you think you doing a lot, sometimes you just feel like maybe I'm just getting tired and never, nothing is gonna change. You applied this job, you applied this job, and you never get it. Or you don't drive or this kind of conversation. And then you will think about it, "OK, maybe this not gonna work. Maybe it's true: Nothing will work." And then you have to push yourself all the time. And then those organization, they will call other people, and just really frustration. So, education, I think, and working together. Then I think we can help a lot. So, we just asking people to get the basic thing.

ABDI: Yeah, education and resources are the big things. There's already resources there. If I go back to your questions, "How your teachers helps you," I was in PCC, and I appreciate my ESL teachers and every teacher who teach me something.

SAARA: [chuckles]

ABDI: And also, getting the resources DRC, disability resources there. Because if you don't know how to access those resources, you can't get it. But for me, I had to struggle before. When

I was coming here, I speak a little English, but when I take ESL placement tested, they placed me. Our ESL instructors here, they placed me Level 6, which is credit class also. So, I started there.

I've been living in South Africa before I came here. In South Africa, they speak English. So, I was good in communication. So, that's big things. I also only very needing help for writing and those things, but communication was— The communication is very important. If you can communicate person, if you— They send me the DRC, and then I can communicate. I don't need interpreter. But the small thing you need, if you need interpreter, that's not gonna work for you. You can even explain what you want directly. So, language barrier is very big.

But there is resources there, and we appreciate that. But if you know those resources, how to get it, that's how you succeed. I was in PCC. It helps me getting what I need, and we are getting our emails every, before class registration started. We have priority registration!

SAARA: [chuckles]

ABDI: We register our classes before other students. We have that privilege also! And before your classes starts, you have to go to your DRC, and you have to go online and submit. Now everything they make online. And if you don't know that, how to use that online system, it's very hard. So, what do you need? I need that chair. That specific chair, they bring me. I need, OK, and break during classes. All that's available for us, and it helped me.

SAARA: Don't forget JAWS.

ABDI: Yeah, JAWS [chuckles].

SAARA: It's enough. I don't know how we can get it.

ABDI: So, the resources are there, and we appreciate having that.

SAARA: Yeah.

ABDI: And we just succeed in having that resources. But those who cannot access the resources, how they came to get that resources? That's the big thing. And that's what we are working on. At least those students I'm working now, if they wanna learn how to write their name and how to fill the application when they go to PCC, and they can communicate with their teacher, an ESL class teacher, that's how you go the second level, the third level, the fourth level. Then if you have a dream to go to college, that's the second or third level. If you wanna do GED or learn some technical things, that's how you wanna go.

SAARA: Yeah.

ABDI: So, you have to know that.

SAARA: AYCO stand African Youth Community Organization.

ABDI: It stands African Youth Community Organization. And we have been working there as a volunteer before, but now we just get some grants because we need some resources.

SAARA: For example, those cultural organization who, because when family comes, if they have six people, two of them disabled, they all have to go that organization, IRCO, to learn the language. So, IRCO has to—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Include everybody.

SAARA: Everybody. Also have to work with PCC for them to be able to build the basics. So, working together. But I think for us, we tried to go there and educate them. We didn't succeeded. So, we are looking, how do we help them? Anybody else who have idea, we looking.

ABDI: I think mostly, people with disability left behind. When the refugee come, the state has a resettlement program, which they help eight months refugees. So, that eight months, you have to become independent economically and to get a job. It's just eight months. So, when you come through, that eight months, it starts. You get some cash. They assign you, and you have to go to IRCO, take the employment training. IRCO has to find you a job to get out of their system. In eight months, if you don't get job, then—

SAARA: Money stop.

ABDI: —the services stopped. Then you have to struggle go. But if you are disabled, they connected you the resources, the disability benefit, the Social Security, SSI. You are available for Voc Rehab.

SAARA: I like to say what is happening for the eight month: Everybody is difficult to go those eight months. For anyone who's new this country, it's really hard to navigate for eight month.

For my argument what is: For those eight month, we would love to have the opportunity to be there, to have the English classes, to have like they have a lot of activity there, family stuff. And we want those eight month, if they even focused to get disabled person for the resources, like this what exist, you know? If you are this, you can go this here. You can learn from here. If you blind, you can go there. If you need this, those resources. If they can do the employment they doing it, they can do the connection for the other things. They can do the DDS for the application.

And the SSI is first paper they fill out. What that mean is 100 people will come after that. That individual is themself to figure out. The first paper, if they do this, over for them. So, that individual will go, "OK, what the next, you need to see psychology doctor." You have to prove you're disabled. It takes eight months, nine months. Sometimes it's between the eight month, the person will not get the SSI still.

But what I'm asking them is, those eight months, you allowing everybody what will be resources for them we can use there. It could be the language, it could be connecting, educating like how they gonna get the resources for their each individual goals, like where they can have the opportunity. They not focusing that because the other job they think is priorities more important than somebody like me who comes there, "What are you looking? We don't have anything for you." And you just go. But I can learn the language. They can connect me PCC. They can connect me Commission for the Blind. They can do a lot of things. And then I can be, OK, now next level, yeah. Something exists there.

So, those basic thing, how they gonna take that? They don't think that's important. Of course, they will say, "We following ADA! The building accessible. We not discriminate anybody."

ABDI: Yeah, restroom accessible.

[audience chuckles]

SAARA: Everything accessible! That's for the ADA. That's it. Even they have a big wall there for picture for 25.

[audience chuckles]

SAARA: I got there and really, really make difficult people to go there for disabled people. So, now when one person is there for working, but everyday he's having hard time there. But I don't know how long he will stay there. I just thought maybe if somebody work there, they can change the attitude, but they making hell. It's so hard if they making you hell, if you work there. Difficult. So, it's still, it's hard for anybody, I think. Because what we like to change in the attitude is that the disabled person doesn't need only to get SSI, but they need the other area. And they OK for them to let it know, if you have a job, the job they can do, let them know. Let's advocate them. Let apply them. Let talk to them. Let who, which organization will advocate for them. Connect with them. So, it doesn't have to be like, "Oh, you can stay home. You can have this."

ABDI: Yeah. For the first eight months, you're in refugee. And in that program for the resettle refugee, that eight months, most of the disabled folks who came here, they are not even ready. They go through with the doctors. They go through a lot of things because they come from, most of them, refugee camps. They come from countries where they have to go through— Sometimes, they need doctors. Maybe they hospitalized. They go through surgeries. Because they didn't get, where they came from, proper medical [unclear].

So, for example, in African Youth Community—AYCO, where I work—we get some referrals from Multnomah County, Mid-County Clinic. So, the clinic, the doctors refer us some new refugees disabled, who just came. And I have a client now. He has been this country in one year. He didn't get a wheelchair still. It's processing. I was talking with him today, and he has been waiting one year. I talked to a doctor and the community health worker there. They say, "What is going on?"

"Oh, we send it to Numotion," and Numotion is—

KAHTY: No wonder!

[audience laughs]

ABDI: Yeah. "We send to Numotion."

It's more than one year he has been. They send someone who did the measurement at home, and they send a Physical Therapy, a OT, who did the measurement of things, and Numotion is still processing his wheelchair. He got a big hospital wheelchair he can't push. You see those wheelchairs.

KATHY: I know!

ABDI: They design the hospital only to push someone. And he has been almost one year and half in this country. He doesn't have his wheelchair.

I was telling him, "Why you don't come the ESL class?"

He said—

SAARA: I push.

ABDI: [chuckles] "How can I push this wheelchair? And it's raining! I can't take a bus!"

So, I told him to come tomorrow, and we'll talk to Numotion, and we'll see what is going on. Numotion, it's a company who deal with the wheelchairs.

I went through that when I came here. The doctor has to send the prescription to Numotion. Numotion has to go through the insurance, the OHP or the insurance. Insurance has to provide. They send you someone to do the measurement. Then when they get the insurance approval, you have to wait to order the wheelchair Numotion.

SAARA: Yeah, I was thinking it will be easy first place they arrive, the case manager to start that process. That will be something they can do, those organizations. At least if they start the process and help them to get those still resources, that will be something. I think they can do it.

ABDI: Yeah, it's very hard. When you know the system, how it works, you know where to start. And if you know the language, you know how you contact with your provider. You know how to contact the where you wanna get the resources. You can get easily what you wanted, but—

SAARA: Still struggle.

ABDI: —as you said, the gatekeeper. There is a language barrier. You don't know where to start. And like the example I was giving, this gentleman who is waiting his wheelchair a year: He doesn't know where he contact. There's a language barrier there. He can't call Numotion.

He just go to the doctor. "Oh, I just send the wheelchair. They didn't call you yet?"

So, we don't know where- It's very hard.

SAARA: We want people to help us to advocate this refugee with a disability. We want people to participate what they can do when they see individual with disability who's good. We need especially people who understand what we trying to say, like the process to stand up, advocate, and help us how the people who know better us for the system. Anybody who can help, we really want to help. Because we cannot do ourself this, and we need your voice and your advocacy and to us to help this process to educate the system and the resources so people will not be isolated in home.

SAARA: We also want organization or the advocacy community to ask people who lived, processed, and able-body who doesn't know a lot about this. They come in, maybe, good way in their own, but they really don't know about this issue. So, yeah.

ABDI: Thank you for coming and listening our— For getting solution, just to know there is a problem. So, we are here for just the awareness that these things are exist, and the refugees need that resources. That's what we want. And then thank you for listening us.

SAARA: Yeah.

ABDI: Thank you for your time.

Music in the episode:

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