

## Cities of Light are Providing Safe Havens to Refugees

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Cities of Light are Providing Safe Havens to Refugees UNITED NATIONS, Jun 13 2019 (IPS) - While cities around the world have been providing safe havens to refugees, a few US cities in the Upstate New York region have been integrating refugees and asylum-seekers into their communities. Specifically, the towns of Utica, Buffalo and Syracuse, are welcoming refugees to live and work. These towns share a border with Canada and so have been allowing asylum-seekers into their communities for many years. As of 2018, there are 69,058 immigrant residents in the Buffalo Metro Area, according to a report by New American Economy. This is especially meaningful as immigration policies in the United States have become stricter since the Trump administration took office in 2016. Eva Hassett, the Executive Director of the International Institute of Buffalo, told IPS: 'The Trump administration has lowered

the admissions ceiling for refugees coming into the US drastically. There are far lower numbers of refugees arriving in Buffalo, in New York State, in the US - historically low numbers for a program that started in 1980'. The aforementioned towns fall into the category of 'Cities of Light,' as coined by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This refers to places around the world that have accepted refugees in a warm manner and have provided opportunities and resources that will be beneficial to both the communities and to the refugees who settle in them. This is just one of the ways that refugees are able to lead lives that are safer than what they would experience in their home countries. Since 1950, the UNHCR has been aiding in providing assistance to refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless people. According to the UNHCR, common solutions for refugees include voluntary

repatriation (returning to countries of origin), resettlement in another nation and integration into the host community. Liz Throssell, the UNHCR's Global Spokesperson for the Americas and Europe, told IPS: 'For refugees who cannot go home, integration into their local community can provide a durable solution, allowing them the chance to build a new life. Integration is often a complex and gradual process, with legal, economic, social and cultural dimensions'. 'It places considerable demands placed on both the individual and the host community. But when refugees are integrated, this can bring benefits all round, as the person is able to contribute economically and socially to the community,' she declared. With approximately 1.1 million refugees becoming citizens in the countries in which they claimed asylum, the good that Cities of Light do is evident. These cities have given refugees a way

to feel safe and welcome through bestowing governmental provisions and ways to maintain their cultural identity while being helped to adjust to a new environment. Globally-known Cities of Light include Jakarta, Indonesia; Kigali, Rwanda; Vienna, Austria; São Paulo, Brazil; Erbil, Iraq; Altena, Germany and Gdansk, Poland. Throssell said, 'An increasing number of cities are working to empower refugees and embrace the opportunities they bring. Mayors, local authorities, social enterprises and citizens groups are on the frontlines of the global refugee response, fostering social cohesion, and protecting and assisting the forcibly displaced in their midst.' In Buffalo, benefits have included, 'Affordability, welcoming community, pro-rights and inclusion, lots of support infrastructure, good jobs and cities are easy to get around,' according to Hassett. Similar social and economic effects have been seen in Utica, New York as well. Although the number of refugees allowed into the United States has been noticeably cut down to 30,000 this year due, in part, to immigration policies under the Trump administration, refugees are still moving into New York state. Hassett notes,

'Refugee is an immigration status; it is conferred upon an individual by the US Department of State (DOS). Refugees arrive documented and work authorized, they are screened and greenlighted before they arrive by DOS, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). They will naturalize to be legal permanent residents.' The US refugee resettlement program (officially called Reception and Placement) was established in 1980 and provides 90 days of support and financial support to refugees entering the US under the R&P program. This is the program whose ceiling the President has lowered so drastically'. This sort of migration is possible as residents of the region are promoting job placements, English language services and housing services in order to direct refugees who are already living in the United States to the state. Much of this advertising is done through video campaigns by resettlement agencies, Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats and newspapers that are run by refugees. While this will help give opportunity, it also allows New York to expand its population and the size of its workforce.

Having more people move into towns like Utica, Buffalo and Syracuse has turned areas that once were barren or unsafe, into areas that are bustling with life and culture.