

Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc.

22nd National Conference Summary

The Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc. (ECDC) held its 22nd national conference and affiliate training April 26–April 29, 2016, in Arlington, Virginia, bringing together leaders and stakeholders in refugee and immigrant affairs. This year’s conference, *Beyond Shelter for Refugees and Immigrants: Moving from Protection to Integration*, focused on building welcoming communities for refugees and immigrants and the conference platform facilitated and encouraged dialogues on protection and integration.

The conference began on April 27, 2016, with a video message from Virginia Senator **Mark Warner**, who welcomed conference attendees and spoke about the importance of the Commonwealth supporting resettlement agencies such as ECDC to help refugees and immigrants pursue their American dream, especially with the current political rhetoric and xenophobic tone that contradicts American values.



ECDC Headquarters Program Staff Member: Elizabeth Carlberg.



Conference Keynote, Simon Henshaw and ECDC President, Tsehaye Teferra, Ph.D.

Following Senator Warner’s message, ECDC’s President, **Tsehaye Teferra, Ph.D.**, gave welcoming remarks. Afterwards, **Simon Henshaw**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) at the Department of State gave the keynote address. During his speech, **Mr. Henshaw** emphasized the challenge of effectively delivering humanitarian aid to an increasing number of refugees, particularly since funding for the UNHCR and World Food Program budgets have decreased, and the World Health Organization has closed its clinics in Iraq. Mr. Henshaw also spoke about new initiatives taken by the World Bank and U.S. Treasury and PRM providing funding for refugee camps in Jordan. On the domestic side, Mr. Henshaw stressed the importance of community-based approaches that mitigate barriers that are preventing refugees and immigrants from integrating into their new American communities.

After a thought-provoking keynote, attendees heard from plenary panelists **Mary Margaret Stone**, Deputy Chief, Refugee Affairs, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; **Kenneth Tota**, Deputy Director, Office of Refugee Resettlement; and **Shelly Pitterman**, Regional

Representative, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) about protecting and integrating refugees. The panelists spoke about security vetting, increases in Cuban entries, the expansion of ORR's Preferred Communities program, which provides long-term case management services to vulnerable refugee groups, and the need for the international community to be engaged in the current refugee crisis.

This year's program also included a lightning session where panelists delivered short, dynamic, and stimulating talks that focused on topics such as unaccompanied Eritrean minors, refugee camp conditions in Rwanda, the benefits of volunteerism, advocacy efforts on behalf of refugees and strengthening asylum applications. Panelists included **Stacie Blake**, Director, Government and Community Relations, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants; **Million Mekonnen**, Executive Director, North Carolina African Services Coalition; **Elizabeth Carlberg**, Preferred Communities Program Specialist-AmeriCorps; **Ann Marie Kudlcaz**, Executive Director, Refugee Empowerment Center; and **Nathan Praschan**, Co-Founder, Georgetown University School of Medicine Asylum Program.



Nathan Praschan, Co-Founder, Georgetown University School of Medicine Asylum Program.

The conference program built in a number of educational, resource and engaging sessions that included topics such as Refugees' Rights to Work; Screening for Hepatitis B and C among African Immigrants; Gender Dynamics and Domestic Violence and the Impact on Women's Health. These sessions focused on various issues that refugees and immigrants face and available resources and solutions for these challenges.

Presenters from diverse backgrounds, federal, and local government programs, nonprofits and academicians alike shared their insights on strategies for effective advocacy, addressing workforce integration barriers faced by refugee and immigrant professionals, forced marriage in immigrant communities as well as best practices in serving Eritrean youth. As anticipated, these sessions generated a rich dialogue from both presenters and attendees, each sharing a unique perspective that brought the conference theme into fruition.

Gatluak Ter Thach, Ph.D., President and CEO of Nashville International Center for Empowerment, and a former refugee from South Sudan, gave the luncheon speech. His talk focused on his recent visit to two refugee camps in Gambella, Ethiopia, that host a large number of South Sudanese refugees. He talked about the limited food and water supply, medical care and opportunity for education in these camps.



ECDC affiliates advocating on the Hill.

On the advocacy side, ECDC affiliate representatives went to Capitol Hill, where they had the opportunity to speak about their agencies' work, share refugee success stories and ask their members of Congress to be partners and champion for refugees. The following day, affiliate representatives also brought their concerns to the White House. They met with members of the Domestic Policy Council, Office of Refugee Health and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. During these meetings, they discussed mental health resources for newly arrived refugees,

provided feedback on the Task Force for New Americans and urged members to develop a plan to protect vulnerable refugees, specifically those in Libya, Yemen, South Africa and those crossing the Mediterranean.

After lunch, participants had the opportunity to attend concurrent sessions on refugee youth, working effectively with SIV holders and civil liberty concerns of African refugees and immigrants. Following the concurrent sessions, refugee admissions to the U.S. was the next topic. Speakers included **Kelly Gauger**, Deputy Director, Office of Admissions at PRM; **Ann Chiorazzi**, Policy Branch Chief, Refugee Affairs Division, Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate, USCIS; and **Ann-Marie McGranaghan**, Associate Resettlement Officer at UNHCR. The panelists spoke about UNHCR's global resettlement submissions, state level opposition, surge operation in Jordan, security screening and vetting, processing in Tanzania and Uganda and USCIS's initiatives to streamline processing and increase admissions.

The last presentation for the day, Addressing Refugee Crises: Examining Current Global Conflicts and Refugee Protection Trends, included panelists **Mark Yarnell**, Senior Advocate, Refugees International; **Mitzi Schroeder**, Director for Policy, Jesuit Refugee Service/USA; and **Jennifer Quigley**, Advocacy Strategist for Refugee Protection, Human Rights First. Panelists addressed the emergency arrival of 10,000 refugees from Mozambique, issues registering new arrivals to camps, as well as the persecution of the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar and the status of Syrian refugees in Turkey.

The second day of conference began with a plenary session, Updates from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which included **Anastasia Brown**, Director, Division of Refugee Services; **Dr. Curi Kim**, Director, Division of Refugee Health; and **Carl Rubenstein**, Director, Division of Refugee Assistance. Ms. Brown focused on the various programs at ORR, including the Individual Development Account (IDA) and Ethnic Community Self-Help Program. Dr. Kim spoke about best practices for refugee medical screenings, mental health first aid training for refugee community leaders and services for survivors of torture. Mr. Rubenstein spoke on employment outcomes for State Administered and Wilson-Fish Programs.

Following the ORR panel, attendees heard from the Developing Welcoming Communities panelists, who spoke on how to prepare communities to welcome refugees. Panelist, **Daniel Tamul, Ph.D.**, Assistant Professor, Indiana University-Purdue University, spoke about how

voluntary agencies can challenge arguments with success stories of refugees economically benefiting their communities. **Monica Fuentes**, Director of the D.C. Office of Welcoming America, talked about her organization's framework: connect, build, change, which are the foundation for the organization's initiative, Welcoming Week, an annual campaign that encourages locals to welcome refugees into their communities. **Andres Abella**, Advancement Officer-Grants Manager, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) spoke about how CLINIC uses Catholic teachings through religious leaders to encourage parishioners and other community members to welcome refugees by having welcome dinners in their homes. **Noof Bazaz**, Program Director at ICC Crossroads, emphasized the importance of cultural competency training for teachers and other school staff particularly with the current anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Concurrent sessions for the day included topics on challenges and best practices in serving Eritrean Youth, addressing workforce integration barriers, adjusting client expectations and building career pathways, forced marriage and immigration scams and USCIS customer service tools.

The lunchtime guest speaker, Frank Sharry, Founder and Executive Director of America's Voice, gave a riveting speech on immigration reform, the current surge of anti-refugee sentiment and how resettlement work is even more crucial with the anticipated increase in arrivals for FY 2017.



Knae Eh, employment caseworker from Refugee Empowerment Center, an ECDC affiliate.

The final plenary session of the conference, American Integration: The Successes and Challenges of Refugees, brought the conference to a full circle with a refugee panel consisting of an SIV holder, **Reza Yawari**, Program Officer, Preferred Communities, at ECDC; **Akimana Bahati**, a former Congolese refugee and currently an AmeriCorps Member at ECDC ACC Las Vegas; former asylee from Burkina Faso, **Fatima Porgo**, Program Coordinator, Institute on Domestic Violence in the

African-American Community; and **Knae Eh**, a former Burmese refugee from Thailand and currently an employment caseworker at the Refugee Empowerment Center. The panelists discussed their integration experiences and touched on various topics, including challenges in understanding the American job market, adapting to the American lifestyle, overcoming fear and previous abusive experience. This session provided stories behind what it is really like to integrate into American society and was the perfect way to end the conference.

Later that evening with 145 guests, ECDC's annual banquet celebrated the achievements of African refugees and immigrants. **Maureen Bunyan**, Co-anchor, ABC 7-WJLA, hosted the event for the fourth year in a row. The evening's keynote speaker, **William Hammink**, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Africa, United States Agency for International Development, spoke about the importance of the agency working alongside the African Diaspora to encourage entrepreneurship in Africa. Continuing its tradition, ECDC honored leaders whose lives and work have exemplified excellence in service, encouraged partnerships between

communities, and supported individual and community aspirations. The 2016 honorees were **Lidia Schaeffer** and **Miriam Diria**. Lidia was recognized for establishing an intermediate school in Ethiopia, and Miriam was recognized for her over 20 years of service in refugee resettlement and her leadership role at the Alliance for Multicultural Community Services in Houston, Texas, an ECDC refugee resettlement affiliate.

Guests celebrated with the beats of West African music provided by **Cheick Hamala Diabate** and his Griot Street Band. Lucky winners of silent auctions and the annual raffle were announced later in the evening.