

## **HOUSEKEEPING WORKSHOPS INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE, PHOENIX, AZ**

---

When Mohammed Al-Sharmani took the position to work as the Somali-Bantu adjustment coordinator in Phoenix, Arizona, he regularly visited all the Somali-Bantu clients in their homes. During these home visits, the adjustment coordinator noticed many of the clients were not keeping up on healthy housekeeping habits, despite the fact that case managers covered basic housekeeping in a general housing orientation. Some of the regular problems included bringing in used furniture from alleys where it was discarded—a potential problem with bedbugs on the rise—and not following basic practices of food safety.

In order to avoid offending and singling out a few households with special housekeeping guidance, which would make families reluctant to participate at all, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) decided to conduct more intensive housekeeping and home hygiene classes for all refugees in an apartment complex.

Given the limited literacy of many of the new arrivals, the IRC determined that the housekeeping workshops would be most effective if the classes were taught using practical examples, demonstrating the tools and cleaning products in use in an actual apartment. Providing an inexpensive housekeeping “starter kit” to all refugees who attended the trainings was an incentive to come, but it also helped introduce pre-literate refugees to products that are safe to have in households with young children.

As the housekeeping orientation fell within the stated goals of its federal grant, IRC-Phoenix utilized existing resettlement staff to conduct the workshops. The cost of the cleaning supplies given to each family, totaling less than \$10 per household, was covered by refugee program monies. The organization hopes to be able to give vacuum cleaners to each family at the end of the classes. The vacuum cleaners would be funded by a combination of emergency funds and a discount from a local retailer. Currently, IRC reports, all new arrivals in Phoenix live in houses with carpets, but none own a vacuum.

While the costs of the workshops are minimal, other challenges to the IRC workshops existed. The two primary challenges working with the Somali Bantu specifically were low attendance and lack of child care. To address attendance issues, the adjustment coordinator recognized flyers were ineffective for recruitment. Instead, IRC staff made an average of four visits to each family to personally invite them to the workshops. IRC-Phoenix also chose to hold the classes at a time when all families were able to attend (Sunday mornings) and at a location convenient for the families (within the apartment complex). The venue was an important factor in eliminating childcare challenges, too. The IRC found that having kids in a location just outside of the class and taking bottles of bubbles to keep the kids entertained meant higher attendance of families. In fact, with these minor accommodations, the result was 100% participation of Somali Bantu families in an apartment complex. Both men and women attended the classes. The women were given the cleaning tools, but the men asked many questions and offered comments.

IRC reports that the new arrivals have been very responsive and appreciative of the workshops. During follow-up visits to some of the homes, IRC staff has documented refugees using their new cleaning products, repeating techniques taught in the class and even purchasing replacement products independently. The elders of the community have shared their gratitude and have expressed a desire to have more classes every Sunday. Many of the women are also interested in taking a “field trip” to an American home. Future plans for workshops include basic financial

literacy and budgeting exercises. The apartment complex management was so appreciative of the IRC's workshops that they voluntarily provided refreshments for the classes.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED IN PHOENIX

- **Develop a clear housekeeping orientation based on common challenges.** Different cities, different apartment complexes and different families all contribute variables in housekeeping challenges. However, case managers and refugees can develop a list of important points to share to make sure that some of the most common lessons are shared. Go to PDF pages 154-159 of “At Home with Refugee Housing”

(<http://www.refugeehouse.org/PDFFiles/At%20Home%20with%20Refugee%20Housing%20final.pdf>.)  
to see two agencies' curricula.

- **Locate volunteers on-site or make frequent home visits to watch for “unseen” problems.** Having live-in managers in close communication with voluntary agency staff and volunteers who regularly visit homes of new arrivals means extra eyes are watching for any problems that may develop outside of the controlled space of resettlement offices. With early detection, most housekeeping challenges are likely to be caught before they get out of hand.

- **Know what the lease says, and help new arrivals understand these terms.** Leases can be long and complicated and full of terms that are unfamiliar to even new arrivals with high levels of English language skills. Help introduce some of the key concepts—including maintenance expectations—and important terms as clearly as possible to ready refugees not only for their current apartment, but also for one they might rent in the future. For a glossary of common lease terms, check out PDF pages 178-183 in “At Home with Refugee Housing”

(<http://www.refugeehouse.org/PDFFiles/At%20Home%20with%20Refugee%20Housing%20final.pdf>.)

- **Prevent unnecessary repair bills and ensure the return of security deposits.** The costs of even small repairs can add up fast, and cleaning and damage can turn into hundreds of dollars of lost security deposits. Explain these deposits to new arrivals and, in presenting housekeeping methods, make a concrete connection between keeping the house in good shape and saving money. For sample costs of common repairs and cleaning costs a landlord can deduct from a deposit, go to pages 149-152 of the PDF of Mercy Housing's “At Home with Refugee Housing”

<http://www.refugeehouse.org/PDFFiles/At%20Home%20with%20Refugee%20Housing%20final.pdf>.

- **Train good renters through demonstration and repetition.** Orientation to a new environment requires demonstration and repetition, especially for new arrivals with low literacy levels. Working with ESL instructors, property managers and others to present a consistent message is a key in good orientation for new arrivals. Spring Institute has designed some sample housekeeping orientation lessons for the ESL classroom. Download your free copy by going to

<http://www.springinstitute.org/Files/samplelessonhousing.pdf>.

- **Make workshops and services inclusive, when possible.** People learn best when they feel safe. It is important, especially when teaching housekeeping, to make workshops as inclusive as possible. Not only will different people in a household have different roles in keeping a house clean and safe, but different households also have different levels of knowledge. If someone feels that they are being publicly selected for their poor housekeeping skills, they're more likely to be defensive and not learn the new skills.

• **Follow the basic tenets of adult education and use appropriate outreach methods.** One of the hardest things for adults coming to the United States as refugees is the feeling they have to learn many of the basics all over again. Holding to the tenets of adult education can help ensure that lessons welcome and do not threaten new arrivals' input and adoption. Check out Ohio State University's Center on Education and Training for Employment for some of these guidelines.

<http://www.cete.org/acve/docs/pab00008.pdf>

• **Provide starter housekeeping kits for new renters.** American grocery stores are notoriously large, and it's easy to lose track of the thousands of products. Providing housekeeping starter kits ensures that refugees have a visual reference for buying replacements, and they run less risk of buying inappropriate or dangerous chemicals to clean their new homes.

• **Familiarize families with safe, low-cost "green" cleaning alternatives.** In addition to being expensive, many commercial cleaners are unsafe to have around young children. As part of a housekeeping workshop, introducing some "recipes" for green cleansers and how to best use them in the house can save money and trips to the hospital. For examples of homemade "green" cleansers, go to <http://www.care2.com/greenliving/make-your-own-non-toxic-cleaning-kit.html>

#### **MORE RESOURCES**

• The Center for Applied Linguistics' (CAL) Cultural Orientation Resource Center has published a handbook of cultural orientation lessons to be conducted after refugees arrive in the United States. The lessons are designed to mesh with lessons covered in pre-departure cultural orientation classes. Of particular relevance to housekeeping and housing orientation are the lessons "CO Topic: Emergency 911," "CO Topic: Home Safety" and "Co Topic: Orientation to the Kitchen." The complete handbook, *Cultural Orientation for U.S. Trainers*, is available for purchase from the CAL website, [www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org).

#### **For more information on the housekeeping workshops in Phoenix, please contact:**

Linda McAllister

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

Phoenix, AZ

[Lindam@theirc.org](mailto:Lindam@theirc.org)

(602) 433-2440

Website: [www.theirc.org/where.the\\_irc\\_in\\_phoenix.html](http://www.theirc.org/where.the_irc_in_phoenix.html)

Excerpted from **At Home with Refugee Housing: Resettlement to Integration**, © 2007, Mercy Housing. For a PDF of the full publications, including tools and appendices, and for related readings, go to [www.refugeehouse.org/publications](http://www.refugeehouse.org/publications)