

Refugees Served by RSC Latin America

Background

RSC Latin America provides Cultural Orientation (CO) to U.S.-bound refugees in the region. Students thus far have exclusively been of Mestizo, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian descent who are living in various locations in Ecuador. RSC Latin America anticipates that, due to demand, CO may also be conducted in the future in other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Groups served

At this time, the program serves primarily Colombian refugees who have fled to Ecuador, citing a refugee claim based on persecution from illegal armed groups within Colombia (FARC guerrillas and/or neo-paramilitary groups). Ecuador hosts the largest number of refugees in Latin America, and over 98% of recognized refugees in Ecuador are from Colombia. According to UNHCR, 23% of the refugees in Ecuador are children. Roughly 40% of the refugees in Ecuador live in rural areas, while approximately 60% live in urban locations.

Colombians suffer from discrimination which inhibits their local integration prospects in Ecuador. In addition, financial assistance from UNHCR and other international organizations is limited, making it necessary for refugees to support themselves and attempt to find employment in Ecuador. If lucky enough, Colombian refugees in Ecuador may find employment in several sectors including construction, manual labor, retail, and the food industry. Most refugees work without contracts and therefore have no recourse for justice if they face discrimination or harassment in the workplace.

Other populations projected to attend CO at different Latin American locations in the future may include Bangladeshi, Congolese, Cuban, Gambian, Haitian, and Iranian refugees.

Cultural Orientation Delivery

At present, CO has only been delivered in Quito, Ecuador. Delivery at other sites in Ecuador and Latin America will be triggered by the accumulation of refugees eligible for CO at those sites. RSC Latin America conducts US CO sessions that last a total of 15 hours divided evenly among 3 days.

In part due to the support offered to refugees who attend CO in Quito (transportation assistance, food and board, daycare services), the CO program in Ecuador has thus far enjoyed a high attendance rate among those invited to attend (ages 12-65).

Curriculum and Delivery

The program's curriculum has been closely developed and aligned with the results of the Overseas CO Objectives and Indicators project and is based on the contents of *Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees* and its accompanying video. Feedback received from refugees who have attended CO and who have already been resettled to the United States is also being incorporated into CO delivery at RSC Latin America.

Orientation is conducted completely in Spanish. The courses are based on experiential and active learning, with the majority of training conducted through group activities, question periods, discussions, debates, and dialogue between the students. Topics of concern for the Colombian caseload, as described below, receive particular focus during CO.

Characteristics and Concerns

Most Colombian refugees have some basic knowledge of the US, but some have received misinformation regarding the country and its culture. Some attendees admit that elements discussed during Overseas CO differs from what they previously thought or heard from other refugees. Most applicants do not have family in the United States, so information from CO is often not contested by other sources; this aids CO facilitators in establishing realistic expectations among refugees headed to the United States.

The Colombian caseload tends to be very active and engaged during CO, as well as vocal about their concerns. Attendees often demonstrate a great willingness to learn. All these characteristics contribute to a fun and informal environment, which allows for excellent dialogue.

During the three-day CO, Colombian refugees ask many questions about employment, health insurance, education, the legal system and laws in the United States, their rights and responsibilities, the possibility to bring their extended families to the United States, and status adjustment procedures. They note that, regardless of being recognized as refugees or asylum seekers, their rights are often violated in their current situation. As a result, the attendees are very much concerned with the protection of their rights and want to know more about what actions they can take should their rights be ignored by landlords, employers, or other people. Other questions include the possibility of opening businesses (ethnic restaurants, food stands, etc.) and the necessary licensing and permit acquisition procedures.

Another concern of Colombian refugees is what they hear via media outlets regarding the deportation of people of Latin origin in the United States. As part of our lesson on benefits, we outline the difference between refugees who are resettled in the United States and migrants who arrive independently and without refugee status. Special care is taken during the rights and responsibilities unit to dispel any misconceptions, ensuring that refugees know that their resettlement to the United States is permanent and that they can begin rebuilding their lives without fear of being forced to leave as long as they follow the laws of the United States.

Linked to our discussion on rights and responsibilities are the Colombian caseload's questions about disciplining their children without using forms of corporal punishment, responsibilities regarding registration for the Selective Service, and the possibilities of enlisting in the United States Armed Forces.

Regardless of their varied educational backgrounds or prior work experience, participants are encouraged throughout CO to be pro-active, resourceful, and inquisitive. They are also repeatedly advised to become independent, and to strive to improve their English as a tool for success.