

**APPENDIX B –
VIRGINIA REFUGEE HEALING PARTNERSHIP FINAL REPORT**

Peer Leader Program to Support Refugee Students at Harrisonburg High School

Contractor: **Center for International Stabilization and Recovery, James Madison University**

Contracting Agency: **The Commonwealth of Virginia, through the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS)**

Final Narrative Report
Report Date: **June 30, 2016**

The Commonwealth of Virginia, through the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), and James Madison University's Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR) signed CONTRACT #: 720C-04477-16M with a period of performance from February 1, 2016-June 30, 2016 for the purpose of having CISR [the "Contractor"] provide services to support and to improve social integration of recently-arrived students coming from refugee families, thereby improving academic performance and reducing stress related to transition to a new community. The objectives and activities are outlined in the Scope of Work below (as revised in May 2016).

2.0 SCOPE OF WORK:

The Contractor, shall:

2.1 Prepare refugee students to become Peer Leaders (PLs): Thirteen students from refugee families will be selected as new PLs for this academic year. They will join students from last year's PL group. Selection will be based on good academic performance, English language proficiency, and status as a refugee or asylee from Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, Congo, Ethiopia, or Eritrea.

2.1.1 A two-day training will initiate these new students to the goals and structure of the Peer Leadership Program, and to their responsibilities as PLs. Training will include capacity-building for compassionate listening, positive interaction, information exchange, handling problems, and referral to school services and staff.

2.1.2 PLs will receive ongoing orientation and guidance from their supervisors at school.

2.2 Regular monitoring of Peer Leadership Activities: PLs will provide information about their activities and will be observed by project staff.

- 2.2.1 “Supervisors will meet individually with peer leader participants and note the nature of the contact between participants, whether students self-report their contact as positive, neutral or negative, and comment on the relationships.
- 2.2.2 “Supervisors will meet individually with peer leader participants to assess their mood, hopefulness, signs of stress and level of activity.”
- 2.2.3 PLs will meet individually with supervisors, and as a group, at least once a month to discuss challenges and ask questions.
- 2.2.4 “Supervisors will document contact conversations for analysis. Peers who exhibit signs of depression or severe stress may be referred to the school counseling office.”
- 2.3 Evaluation of Peer Leadership Program: Specific activities will be taken to assess the program during the academic year.
- 2.3.1 “Two (2) JMU students in the Psychology program will administer a Peer Leader Survey and a Supervisor Survey near the end of the school year to assess the impact of participation in the program on PLs’ attitudes toward school and life activities, and their desire to continue with the PL program.”*
- 2.3.2 [Deleted]
- 2.3.3 Supervisors will monitor the overall academic performance of peers during the year, to identify students with significant problems and refer them to school services or staff for assistance.
- 2.3.4 At the conclusion of the academic year (June 2016), all information will be analyzed and a final report on the project will be produced. It will include identification of successes and recommendations for improvements.

***Note:** These surveys will form a baseline of information to use to continue to evaluate the PL program in future years. In future school years, the program will conduct the Peer Leader and Supervisor Surveys at the start and the end of the school year and compare results across time. The survey results will help to improve the program in the future by collecting information on the effectiveness of this program for transitioning students. Using this information, the program can be modified in the future to provide the best services possible, to improve social integration of recently-arrived students from refugee families and support the students’ overall ability to adjust and thrive in this new community.

Final Report on the Peer Leader Program to Support Refugee Students at Harrisonburg High School, February 1 to June 30, 2016

Cameron Macauley, Peer Leader Trainer

1. Executive Summary

The Commonwealth of Virginia, through the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) in collaboration with James Madison University's Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR) and the Church World Service (CWS) Immigration and Refugee Office, created the Peer Leader Program at Harrisonburg High School for the purpose of providing support services to recently-arrived students from refugee families, with the overall goal of reducing stress related to the transition to a new community. The period of performance was from February 1, 2016 – June 30, 2016.

The program was intended to assist students in building a peer network quickly and to feel welcomed and accepted in the school environment in order to 1) accelerate social integration; 2) improve academic acclimatization; 3) keep students from incurring disciplinary offenses; and 4) improve emotional and psychological health. Similar programs implemented in other places have reduced antisocial behavior and improved emotional health.¹

A pilot program initiated at Harrisonburg High School between February and June of 2015, involving 13 students, suggested that our methodology was sound, and it was our intention to subsequently measure changes in attitude, academic performance, psychological health, and engagement in school activities during the 2015-2016 academic year. Unfortunately, a delay in receipt of funding for the program prevented us from carrying out this detailed evaluation. We did conduct a survey in June 2016 to obtain information about participants' opinions of the program.

Program activities for the 2015-2016 school year consisted of an August training to orient students, all of whom come from refugee families, on ways that they could support new arrivals, also from refugee families. Peer Leaders were assigned to newly-arrived students ("peers"), matching them by gender, grade level, and country of origin. Peer Leaders met regularly as a group and with their supervisors to discuss their interactions with their peers. A second training was conducted on June 4-6, 2016, which included a number of new arrivals and focused on a continuation of the peer leadership activities during the coming academic year, starting in the fall of 2016.

¹Bellah Nanjekho Kiteki , ["Acculturation and psychosocial adjustment of African adolescent refugees in the United States: the role of social support."](#) Doctoral Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), 2011. See also ["Peer Groups for Refugee Adolescents," International Rescue Committee, 2004.](#)

2. Program Participants

A total of forty-one students participated in the program as Peer Leaders. Of these, thirty-three took part in one or more of the three trainings, and eight were allowed to participate without training, after a special orientation from the supervisor. Thirty-one remain active in the program. There were 22 female and 19 male participants from six countries:

| Countries/Nationalities** | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|
| Iraqi Kurdistan | 7 |
| Iraq | 16 |
| Congo | 8 |
| Eritrea | 7 |
| Ethiopia | 2 |
| Sudan | 1 |
| Total | 41 |

**Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan are listed separately because of the language differences (Arabic vs. Kurdish speakers). Both groups had to be given distinct attention in the project implementation.

| Gender |
|---------------|
| M = 19 |
| F = 22 |

| Trained (some attended more than one training) | |
|---|----|
| Feb 2015 (pilot) | 13 |
| Aug 2015 | 13 |
| Jun 2016 | 15 |
| | |
| Not trained | 8 |
| | |
| Inactive | 10 |

Participants were all in either the 9th, 10th, or 11th grades and had been in the US from three months to almost six years. All were proficient in English to varying degrees. Many had been engaged in other types of social service programs, such as tutoring, mentoring, assisting teachers or coaching sports.

3. Program Activities

Training, August 2015: The initial training for the 2015-2016 school year took place on August 21-22, 2015. There were thirteen participants, four male and nine female, from the 9th, 10th and 11th grades. Four came from Iraq, three from Iraqi Kurdistan, one from Congo, one from Sudan, one from Ethiopia, and three were from Eritrea. Three had attended a previous training during the pilot program in February.

The training focused on the role of the peer leader, which is intended to be a combination of friend, mentor and guide. We emphasized that the Peer Leader does not 'solve problems' or give advice except when asked to do so, and characterized the 'peer' concept of two equals, one of whom has lived in the US longer and may speak better English. An important aspect of peer leadership is to act as a role model, particularly in terms of attention to schoolwork and conforming to disciplinary policies. As a primary goal of the program is socialization, we encouraged Peer Leaders to meet with peers in a group setting whenever possible.

The training offered role-play practice in active listening, trust-building, dealing with strong emotions, advocating for yourself and for others, developing healthy coping techniques, and getting help in school. We also covered behaviors that are disciplinary offenses at Harrisonburg High School, including fighting, bullying, and the use of drugs and alcohol. Participants were enthusiastic and participated fully in every exercise.

Participants also discussed their previous experiences as refugees, describing war-related violence, hardships and their feelings during their initial weeks in the US. A topic that frequently surfaced was the difficulties their parents have in learning English, socializing and coping with anxiety and grief over past events and family members left behind. Students recommended on several occasions that a similar program should be developed for adult refugees in the Harrisonburg community.

In-School Activities: Following the training, Peer leaders were assigned to newly-arrived students from refugee families, and given freedom as to when and how often they would meet. A series of forms was provided on which the Peer Leader was asked to record information about the peer's emotional status and some details about each meeting. These forms were very quickly discarded because the Peer Leaders did not want to complete them.

Rabab Hasan, the program supervisor at Harrisonburg High School, met regularly with all peer leaders and organized regular after-school meetings in which guest speakers gave presentations on various topics. These meetings included time for questions and discussion. Originally scheduled on a weekly basis, they were rescheduled to take place once a month because it was difficult for some students to stay after school.

Two honors students from James Madison University were assigned to conduct a program evaluation which involved interviewing all the program participants; however for reasons that will be explained below, this proved too difficult and the evaluation was eventually abandoned.

Training, June 2016: We conducted a second training for both new and experienced Peer Leaders at the end of the 2015-2016 academic year. There were fifteen participants, seven male and eight female, from the 9th, 10th and 11th grades. Five

came from Iraq, one from Iraqi Kurdistan, one from Sudan, one from Ethiopia, four from Congo, and three were from Eritrea. Three had attended the previous training.

Although this training used some material from the previous training, a number of changes were made. In addition to active listening and managing strong emotions, we asked David Ward from Harrisonburg High School to give a presentation on sensitive disciplinary issues such as sexual assault, substance abuse, and bullying. We also included a session on conflict mediation and resolution. This was partly in response to increased incidents of violence reported in the school during this year, although fewer refugees have been involved in fights at the school.

4. Problems and Challenges

Although we had tested the program methodology with a pilot project during the spring semester of 2015, a number of difficulties became apparent during the 2015-2016 academic year. Some of these were related to program design, while others were the result of unforeseen factors largely beyond our control.

Supervision: Initially we had two supervisors, one paid for twenty hours a week, who had additional duties at Harrisonburg High School. A second was contracted for only five hours a week. Both were refugees, one from Iraq and the other from Eritrea, and both related well to the refugee students. Due to a delay in the DBHDS contract funding until February 2016, our Eritrean supervisor left to pursue other opportunities, and another supervisor was hired late in the year, but by then the program had undergone significant changes.

We were fortunate to have the Program Coordinator from CWS and a Peer Leader School Liaison, both of whom offered considerable program support during the year.

Role of Peer Leaders: The original program design had envisioned the Peer Leaders as mentors to the newly-arrived refugee students while they adjusted to the new cultural and academic environment. One problem with this, we soon discovered, was that both the peers and the Peer Leaders felt the peers also had talents to contribute to the community and that the assigned roles interfered with the friendships that were developing through their interactions. Peers were also interested in the skills provided in the training: active listening, managing strong emotions, and developing healthy coping strategies.

In response to this, we decided to train all interested students as Peer Leaders and do away with the forms. Individuals were still assigned to check in on new arrivals but multiple participants in the program were encouraged to actively support the new arrivals as well.

The students themselves suggested that the system might function more effectively if support was offered by a group in addition to an individual, so that refugee students who had gone through the initial training would *all* be available to help newly-arrived

students, and that meetings would take place with the group. This had the added advantage that the new arrivals were exposed to students with a variety of personalities and experiences, and would be integrated into an existing social network more quickly than before. We will continue to modify this arrangement during the coming year.

Students also commented that while they had time to meet during the school day, new arrivals in particular were interested in meeting after school more regularly to practice English, so that they would have longer blocks of time to converse, and possibly go on more field trips. This would be an expansion of the original peer leader model. We are looking into the feasibility of adding field trips to the program activities.

Program evaluation: The original design of the program had featured extensive record-keeping by supervisors and the Peer Leaders, as a means of gathering information on their interactions with peers. Our hope was that by analyzing interactions between Peer Leaders and the newly-arrived students they were assigned to, we might determine how best to improve the program. To assist with this evaluation, the two JMU students were involved in collecting the completed forms, analyzing the information, and conducting interviews with both peers and Peer Leaders, as well as the supervisors and other school staff.

Problems became immediately apparent. First, collecting the information required the Peer Leader to complete two separate forms—a contact form, completed each time the Peer Leader met with the assigned peer, and an attitude survey form, completed monthly to monitor the peer’s emotional changes over time. Although each of these forms consisted of only eight questions, the Peer Leaders felt that completing the forms interfered substantially with their ability to interact naturally with their peers, who found the questions intrusive, and after a short time they stopped completing the forms.

The student evaluation methodology was much more complex, involving survey forms for peers, Peer Leaders, supervisors and school staff, as well as assent forms and parental consent forms. Surveys had to be completed under private conditions which were nearly impossible to find in the school, and had to be conducted after school, which ran into scheduling problems for the JMU students. Parental consent forms had to be translated into French and Arabic for parents who did not speak English, and funding for this was not available until March of 2016.

By the end of the spring semester, it became clear that these evaluation activities would not be completed.

5. Peer Leader Survey

Realizing that our original evaluation plan was impractical, we decided instead to conduct a survey to assess the Peer Leaders’ opinion of the program. The survey

included nine students who had participated in the program, five new arrivals and four previously-trained Peer Leaders.

Our results indicate a high level of satisfaction with the Peer Leader Program. Those surveyed felt that the program facilitated their social integration, helped them learn about the school and helped them learn English. They also had a number of specific suggestions as to how the program could be improved.

In response to questions about their contact with peers, students indicated that lunchtime was the best time for them to meet, and about half said that they would meet after school or talk over the phone outside school hours.

All of the survey respondents were able to cite examples of ways they had helped their peers or had received help and guidance from their Peer Leaders, including choosing classes and considering what to do after graduation.

Seven of the nine respondents felt that the peer relationship was beneficial, and gave “finding new friends” as a principal benefit, along with solving problems and getting academic help.

Respondents said that they liked the program because of the social network it creates, adding advice and learning about the school as additional benefits. Peer Leaders stated several times that they enjoy helping others. They described the program positively, saying that knowing that there are others who care about you is a great comfort.

Problems or difficulties that Peer Leaders and peers discussed included academic issues, disciplinary problems, topics related to the school or teachers, learning English and how to use the bus.

Respondents felt that listening, being a good friend, helping peers learn about the school, and helping them with homework were important ways of fulfilling the Peer Leader role.

Six Likert-scale questions at the end of the survey asked about respondents’ satisfaction with the program, their level of self-confidence, and the level of stress they are experiencing at school and at home. Respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the program (average 9 out of 10), felt that the work of the Peer Leader was not difficult (4 out of 10), felt confident about their abilities as Peer Leaders (7.6 out of 10), felt that school was somewhat stressful (6.3 out of 10) and home life was only mildly stressful (4 out of 10), and felt strongly that the Peer Leader Program was useful for newly-arrived students from refugee families (9.6 out of 10).

Respondents were asked to suggest ways of improving the program:

- ◆ New arrivals in particular wanted all the new arrivals and interested peer leaders to meet after school once a week.
- ◆ Activities during weekly meetings to encourage everyone to talk with new people and get to know each other better.
- ◆ Include kids who have already graduated.
- ◆ Have new arrivals practice speaking in English during the weekly meetings.
- ◆ Use games to teach some English in the meetings, such as new vocabulary or slang
- ◆ The now-monthly meetings with just the peer leaders and guest speakers should be counted as one of the weekly meetings and new arrivals should be invited to participate even if the English is hard for them.
- ◆ Involve as many refugees and new arrivals as possible to increase the number of friends and conversations that new arrivals can have.

Additional comments about the program included:

- ◆ This is a wonderful and beneficial program, and you can gain a lot from it.
- ◆ It would be better to have a set time during the day to check in with each other, rather than having to fit meetings into an already busy schedule, but some time outside of school would allow for longer more in-depth conversations.
- ◆ Need a space in school for Peer Leaders to meet peers, maybe a classroom
- ◆ If multiple peer leaders are in contact with new arrivals then there would be people socializing with the new arrival even if a peer leader is sick or busy
- ◆ PLs can help people keep up with responsibilities by reminding them and encouraging them.
- ◆ There should be a special program for new arrivals, especially for those who don't speak English well.
- ◆ Having a supervisor is important—Rabab and Zemichael were not always available.
- ◆ Encourage people to join outside groups.
- ◆ Trainings should be more frequent.
- ◆ PL meetings should be at least twice a month; one for activity, one for discussion.
- ◆ Meetings should include fun activities to learn English, and other activities or maybe field trips.

The survey responses are summarized here:

| Survey Question | Responses | Number of Responses |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| Number of assigned peers: | 3 | 1 |
| | 2 | 2 |
| | 0 | 4 |
| | Peer | 2 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| 1. How often do you meet with each peer or with your PL? | Daily | 6 |
| | Twice a week | 1 |
| | Once a week | 1 |
| | No peers assigned | 1 |
| | | |
| 2. What time and place is best for you to meet? (some gave more than one response) | Lunch | 6 |
| | Between classes | 2 |
| | After school | 3 |
| | Library | 1 |
| | Phone | 1 |
| | | |
| 3. Have you ever met your peer(s) outside of school? | Yes | 4 |
| | No | 4 |
| | On the phone | 1 |
| | | |
| 4. Have you referred your peer(s) to a school program for any reason? Which programs? | No | 4 |
| | French Club | 1 |
| | MTC | 1 |
| | Sports | 1 |
| | English | 1 |
| | Avid | 1 |
| | | |
| 5. What other kind of help or guidance have you given your peer(s)? | Choosing classes | 4 |
| | What to do after graduating | 1 |
| | No answer | 4 |
| | | |
| 6. Do you think your peer is benefitting from your help? Why or why not? | I help him get new friends | 4 |
| | They show me what I need | 1 |
| | I helped him/her solve problems | 1 |
| | I helped him/her with schoolwork | 1 |
| | No answer | 2 |
| | | |
| 7. What do you like about this program? | It helps students to know that someone cares about them | 1 |
| | Meeting new people | 1 |
| | Getting advice | 1 |
| | I like helping people | 3 |
| | Learning about our school | 2 |
| | Meeting other people from my country | 1 |
| | | |
| 8. If you could change anything in this program, what changes would you make? | Nothing | 1 |
| | PLs should meet peers in groups | 1 |
| | More activities during the meetings | 2 |
| | Include kids who have already graduated | 1 |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| (Some gave more than one response.) | Teach some English in the meetings | 1 |
| | Bring back weekly PL meetings | 1 |
| | Involve more people | 1 |
| | PLs should spend more time with peers | 1 |
| | More PLs | 1 |
| | | |
| 9. What kinds of problems or difficulties does your peer discuss with you? | No answer | 4 |
| | Academic problems | 1 |
| | Disciplinary problems | 1 |
| | Issues related to the school or teachers | 1 |
| | Learning English | 1 |
| | How to use the bus | 1 |
| | | |
| 10. What do you think are the most useful things that you can do to help your peer(s)? | Be a good friend | 2 |
| | Help them learn about the school | 3 |
| | Help them with homework | 2 |
| | Listen | 2 |

Likert Scale questions:

| Survey Question | Average Response |
|---|---|
| 11. What is your level of satisfaction with this program? | 9 (0 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied) |
| 12. How difficult is your work as a Peer Leader? | 4 (0 = Not at all difficult, 10 = Almost impossible) |
| 13. How good do you feel you are at being a Peer Leader? | 7.6 (0 = not good at all, 10 = very good) |
| 14. How difficult or stressful is your life in school at the moment? | 6.3 (0 = Not at all stressful, 10 = very stressful) |
| 15. How difficult or stressful is your life outside of school at the moment? | 4 (0 = Not at all stressful, 10 = very stressful) |
| 16. How useful do you think this program is for newly-arrived students from refugee families? | 9.6 (0 = Not at all useful, 10 = very useful) |

6. Conclusion

The Peer Leader Program is still being shaped and improved, however our results so far suggest that the program is beneficial to students from refugee families—the peers as well as the Peer Leaders. We had hoped to conduct a thorough evaluation of the program during this year, but a number of factors prevented us from doing so. We now have a clearer understanding of some of the challenges in conducting such an evaluation, and in the future we expect to gather data that will allow a more thorough assessment of the program's strengths and weaknesses.

Our interactions with both Peer Leaders and peers during this past year suggest that the program achieved its goals of 1) accelerating social integration; 2) improving academic acclimatization; 3) keeping students from incurring disciplinary offenses; and 4) improving emotional and psychological health.

The importance of such a program has grown clearer to us during our contact with these students, many of whom have lived in war-affected communities and refugee camps where schools operated sporadically and were affected by scarce resources. Many of these students experienced or witnessed violence and suffered some degree of psychological trauma. Without the benefit of a positive social environment, these students are at risk for a variety of social and psychological problems. However, as a result of our observations during this year, we feel increasingly confident that these students will perform well in school and will make positive contributions to their communities.