

Refugee from Congo speaks of challenges in Iowa City

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IOWA CITY - Being a refugee is hard. But there are ways to make it easier.

That was the heart of a message delivered Wednesday by Bisetsa Ntwari, 31, to a group of Johnson County community leaders gathered to discuss how better to assist the growing number of refugees in the area.

More than 60 people attended the meeting, held at First Presbyterian Church in Iowa City.

Ntwari, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, spoke of living in refugee camps across Africa after his father died as a result of war in 1997. Ntwari said he help fellow refugees overcome communication barriers and deal with emotional trauma.

He ended up in Iowa City and said he dealt with many of the same issues, only he found little help.

'I started struggling in life," he said. 'I lived a strange life I never lived before.'

He said he eventually overcame the barriers and once again started helping other area refugees who were friends. Ntwari said he began translating for those who didn't speak English. He bought a computer and printer for fellow refugees to use to apply for green cards and use for tasks like finding a doctor.

'I can help a refugee because I am able to help myself," he said.

In 2013, Ntwari went to work as a translator for ICompassion, an Iowa City organization that focuses on food assistance, immigration services, education and transportation for area residents.

He said he has noticed language barriers prevent refugees in Johnson County from securing proper housing, advanced education and jobs that pay enough to allow them to buy houses and be financially stable.

He said Wednesday's meeting, where attendees included Sen. Joe Bolcom, D-Iowa City, and Bob Dvorsky, D-Coralville, administrators from the Iowa City school district - is a step in the right direction for making improvements.

Bolcom reiterated that the purpose of the meeting was to see what is already being done to support refugees and identify service gaps.

'It's good for the community at large to have everybody be successful," Bolcom said.

Teresa Stecker, executive director of ICompassion, Kent Ferris, who works with refugees in the Davenport Diocese, Joan Vanden Berg, who works with the Iowa City Community School District, Ann Valentine, dean of Kirkwood Community College, and others spoke about programs their organizations are working on to solve issues for refugees regarding language barriers, education opportunities, lack of affordable housing, food assistance and access to health care.

Ann Grosscup, who works with refugees through First Presbyterian Church Servanthood Ministry, said the meeting also served to advocate for more attention and financial resources from the state outside of Polk County, where she said the majority of services for refugees in the state exist. Chad Dahm, State Refugee Coordinator with the Iowa Department of Human Resources, agreed.

'It's a good thing if you're a refugee and you land in Des Moines, but if you land outside of Des Moines, I don't know what we're doing for you," Dahm said, though he added officials from the Bureau of Refugee Programs are beginning to brainstorm how to spread services across the state.

It's unclear what the next steps are in terms of continuing the discussion about local refugees. Names and contact information for those in attendance were collected Wednesday.

Bolcom said it's important to find solutions to help refugees overcome barriers.

'We have newcomers to our community that need our help to figure out how things work here - the language, figure out how to get a good job," he said. 'That's just going to make the community stronger.'