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US Agencies Struggle to Protect Resettled Refugees Against COVID-19

*Iain Guest, Executive Director of The Advocacy Project, wrote this article
from home in Newport, Rhode Island.*

In 1996 Laura, 51, fled a brutal civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has been described by the UN as "rape capital of the world." After spending 21 years in a refugee camp in Tanzania, Laura was accepted for resettlement in the US. She arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, with three children and a grandchild in February 2018.

Now, after two years of struggling to adjust to a new life in the US, Laura is battling the COVID-19 crisis.

Her problems are piling up. On March 26, Laura lost her first real job at a hotel in Newport. She is being asked to pay \$900 to cover rent in April. She does not know if she qualifies for unemployment benefits or for relief under

CARES (the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) which sends \$1,200 to families that earn less than \$75,000 a year.

Laura said she had received some paperwork in the mail but she does not read or speak English.

"(Laura) was vulnerable before COVID-19," said Clement Shabani, a former refugee from the Congo who lives and works in Providence. "She is doubly vulnerable now." Mr Shabani and his wife co-direct a nonprofit organization, [Women's Refugee Care](#), that currently works with 256 refugees from East Africa, including Laura.

Laura - who asked that her real name not be used for this article - told her story recently by phone from Providence. Mr Shabani interpreted from Swahili to English.

Mr Shabani said that marginalized people are particularly in need of care at this time - a view that is widely held among relief agencies. But others who commented for this article argued that the COVID-19 crisis spares no one. This, they said, makes it much harder to make the case for preferential treatment even for refugees.

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Laura is among 3,177 former refugees who have arrived in Rhode Island since January 2000, [according to statistics from the US Department of State](#). (The total number accepted by the US is 983,004). Adjusting to life in the US has not been easy, even before COVID-19.

The resettlement of refugees in Rhode Island is managed on behalf of the US federal government by the [Dorcas International Institute](#) in Providence. Anne Fortier, who heads the resettlement team at Dorcas said her agency expects to work with about 75 refugees this year. The last family arrived in early March.

Ms Fortier said that the full resettlement of refugees can take up to 5 years, but that the process starts on arrival. Families receive around \$1,200 of federal funding a month through Dorcas for three months, during which

time they are expected to look for an entry level job and strongly encouraged to take English language classes.

Mr Shabani and his wife both found work within three months and won scholarships to the Rhode Island College in Providence before establishing their non-profit in 2015. But Mr Shabani said they had been helped by having learned English in Thailand before coming to the US.

In sharp contrast, Laura came to the US without English and failed her English language exam after a year of classes because, she said, "I did not go to school at home in Africa." According to Mr Shabani, Laura knows only two English words - "Thank You."

Mr Shabani described the 3-month deadline as "unrealistic" and said that less than a third of the 61 refugee families that he works with managed to find a job soon after arriving, in spite of a strong economy. As a single mother from Africa, Laura was bound to find it difficult, he suggested.

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After failing to find work within three months, Laura continued to receive \$500 a month through Dorcas until the end of the year, at which point the pressure to earn money became intense. She was hired by [Beautiful Day](#), a Providence-based organization that employs refugees to produce and sell granola and is a familiar presence at farmers' markets in the Newport area.

Late in 2019, Dorcas secured work for Laura and five other Congolese refugees at the Chalet Navy Hotel in Newport. Dorcas has found jobs for about 175 immigrants and refugees in the state since July 1, but Brian Hull, who heads the employment team at Dorcas, said he had been particularly pleased at the hotel's offer.

"I am utterly grateful to every employer that steps up to the plate and hires low-literacy immigrants and refugees - because not a lot of employers do," said Mr Hull.

Work at the Newport hotel was not easy for Laura. She said that her day had started at 5.30 am and that she would reach the hotel three hours later, after three changes of bus and a 40-minute walk to the hotel.

Laura understood that she was being paid for six hours a day, but said that the hotel would usually ask her to clean about 20 bedrooms a day, regardless of how long it took and without extra pay. Her average weekly pay check was \$250.

Laura said she never learned the name of her hotel supervisor and that they communicated through "sign language" throughout the four months. Nonetheless the arrangement worked well, said Laura, because another Congolese woman who spoke some English had explained the tasks before leaving the hotel for other work.

Neither Laura nor the agencies that work with her know whether her dismissal was due to the economic crisis. The Navy Chalet Hotel is owned by [Roedel Companies](#), which declined to comment for this article.

Brian Hull from Dorcas said that the dismissal of Laura and the five other refugees had come as a disappointment because his team had visited the hotel several times and was on the point of organizing language training at the hotel.

Whatever had happened, said Mr Hull, he hoped it would not turn the hotel against refugees in the future. "It was already hard enough to find employers to hire refugees with low literacy. In a world of 25% unemployment it may become impossible. I'm terrified that the most vulnerable people in our state will suffer the most," he said.

Asked about the legal obligations on the hotel, Sarah Bratko, a lawyer at the [Rhode Island Hospitality Association](#) in Cranston, RI, said that US federal and state labor law generally requires employers to make information available. but not to ensure that employees understand it. She added that Rhode Island applies the At Will principle, which means that staff can be dismissed for any reason and without warning as long as the reason is not illegal.

Evan Smith, the president of [Discover Newport](#), which represents the tourism industry in Greater Newport, said it was hard to make a special case for short-term workers at a time when so many loyal full-time employees are losing their jobs.

Mr Smith estimates that only 150 workers are currently employed in Newport hotels, compared to the 2,000 who normally work in the sector.

"I have laid off 18 (out of 22) employees," he said. "Do I care? Yes - I love my employees. Do I feel good about laying them off? No - I feel sick to my stomach."

But, he continued, employers have little alternative at such a time. "My job is to save the company so that I can employ people again in future."

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Back in Providence, meanwhile, Laura's bills are piling up. She expressed most concern about a demand for \$900 to cover the April rent. While evictions in Rhode Island have been suspended as long as courts are out of session, it is left to landlords and their tenants to decide whether and how rent is paid.

This puts Laura at a disadvantage said Mr Shabani, because "voiceless people are in no position to bargain and some landlords exploit this."

Faced by these new pressures, the agencies have redoubled their efforts. Mr Hull said that Dorcas has established an emergency housing fund to help refugees avoid eviction. In addition, he said, the organization submitted unemployment claims for Laura and the five other Newport workers as soon as he learned they had been laid off.

Women's Refugee Care is currently advising its clients how to apply for federal relief under the CARES act. Several of the 61 African refugee families have already received CARES money, said Mr Shabani, but he did not know whether Laura would qualify because she has not filed any taxes as required by the law.

Such questions are being turned over to a group of students from [Brown University](#) who are volunteering with Mr Shabani's organization.

These efforts underscore the value of community-based initiatives like Women's Refugee Care, which serve as a bridge between refugees and

society at large. Mr Shabani and his wife are particularly effective because they were once refugees themselves and understand the language and culture of their clients.

For Mr Shabani and his wife, the years of hard work are paying off. The budget of Women's Refugee Care has grown from \$25,000 to \$80,000, helped by 230 individual donors and a recent grant from the [Rhode Island Foundation](#). This has made it possible for Mr Shabani to provide grants of \$200 to 24 refugee families, and deliver food packages to another 16 families.

Mr Shabani said he also calls about 8 families a day to offer advice, as he did recently when Laura was unable to refill her prescriptions at the local pharmacy. The organization posts a Swahili version on What'sApp of the [daily press conference](#) given by Gina Raimondo, the governor of Rhode Island.

For her part, Laura expressed appreciation for the support and seemed to be in good spirits during the interview, in spite of her recent setbacks.

Asked whether she regretted her decision to come to the US, she answered with a chuckle: "No, no, no! I have many friends and whenever it seems difficult I understand that they too are affected. That makes me feel better."

How to help:

- Dorcas International. Contact Baha Sadr, Director of Development & Community Outreach, bsadr@diiri.org, (401) 784-8611.
- Women's Refugee Care. Contact Aline Binyungu abinyungu.wrc@gmail.com, (401) 808-2303; Clement Shabani cshabani.wrc@gmail.com, (401) 545-1532.

