HIAS PA Refugee Resettlement: Transportation Barriers to Healthcare

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Background Info

On Refugee Resettlement
A refugee is any person who is outside the country of their nationality and unable to return to that country due to well-founded fear of persecution. Refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S. aim to receive, place, and orient refugees within 90 days of arrival. Part of this process includes health insurance enrollment and screenings for communicable diseases.

On HIAS
HIAS (originally Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society but now with a standalone acronym) is one of nine voluntary agencies which collaborate with the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement. HIAS Pennsylvania (HIAS PA) provides legal and supportive services to immigrants and refugees. As a refugee assistance organization, HIAS PA welcomes refugees from HIAS National assignments.

Refugees come to HIAS PA with varying degrees of language proficiency, living experience in cities, and thus with widely varying transportation literacy. Cues are essential to understanding public transportation in face of language barriers. See HIAS PA Refugee Resettlement Escort Tip Sheet or CHOP Map for more information.

Field Observations

Most common routes taken

Google Maps

Despite the fact that Philadelphia offers the 6th largest public transit system in the U.S., a multitude of transportation barriers still presents obstacles to many refugees. These include:

- Extended travel time in public transportation
- Evaluating transportation options and ability to walk long distances with children
- Navigating bus and train stops, including direction of vehicle and name of stop
- Signs on or inside vehicle
- Using tokens and buying transfers
- SEPTA costs and delays
- Navigating Penn Medicine campus and check-in

Learning

On this internship
This internship involved escorting clients under 18 years old to initial healthcare appointments, most often within their first week of arrival in the U.S. I made weekly escorts for lab at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) main campus, or to refugee clinic at CHOP Karabots. Occasionally, I escorted adult clients to specialist and follow-up appointments on the Penn Medicine campus. Public transportation was our only mode of travel. Additional work included escorts to Pennsylvania Department of Transportation offices, health appointment setups, healthcare and school registration, and appointment reminders to clients via Language Line phone interpretation.

My own learning processes

- Navigating SEPTA
- Understanding complex healthcare system and registration for refugees
- Expecting the unexpected, especially transportation detours and delays

U.S. Administration for Children & Families

Google Maps

HIAS PA Refugee Thanksgiving 2015