

Community-based Service Exchange Program to Meet Unmet Needs of Older Refugees

In practice, this part of the work will balance with the previously described projects, but here requires a larger explanation in order to demonstrate how it accesses the resources of society at large to meet the unmet needs of older refugees.

What is a community-based service exchange program? Basically individuals join what is called a “time bank,” going through an intake at which they identify both their needs and their assets. The new member lists practical services they wish to offer, and has at hand a virtual “supermarket” of services – ranging from snow shoveling to medical care – offered by other members to choose from. Members exchange goods and services by “buying” and “selling” with the alternative currency of “time dollars.” Each service is measured (paid for) in time dollars: one hour’s worth of service earns one time dollar, and one time dollar earned, can be used to “pay” for one hour’s service.

The Maine Time Bank (MTB), an affiliate of Time Banks USA (<http://www.timebanks.org/>), began in 1997, launched by Richard Rockefeller who was inspired by founder Edgar Cahn, author of “No More Throw Away People” (Essential Books, Washington, DC, © 2000) Funded by Rockefeller for its first ten years the organization grew from a dozen members to the present 750 members. Now in its 12th year, MTB is a national leader in the time banking movement, and is supported by grants and member contributions. Its primary purpose is to provide a safe means for members from a variety of backgrounds to build relationships and to obtain goods and services they may not be able to afford in the cash economy, or that may not be available through social services or from overstretched or absent family and friends.

MTB welcomes people of all ethnicities, economic statuses, educational levels, and all ages. But it is notable that the practice of time banking has proven to be particularly effective with seniors. A rigorous study in the 15th year of Elderplan, a New York time bank, demonstrates this success. (see Appendix, “Executive Summary: An Evaluation of Elderplan’s Time Dollar Model”) In 1987 an HMO in Brooklyn, NY decided to test the time dollar model to provide needed services to older persons. Called Elderplan, they hoped this low-cost, low-tech program would be a cost-effective way to provide services to members while improving quality of life. Results were observable, and for the seniors, life-changing. Since the program’s inception over 150,000 hours of service have been provided to 7,000 older adults. The top services accessed were transportation to doctor’s appointments, respite, peer counseling, hospital and home visits, paying bills, reading mail, and grocery shopping. Participation in the program had a direct effect on members’ physical and mental health. Members reported lower number of medications used and fewer hospitalizations. Members also reported better mental health and a greater sense of overall well-being. The 2002 study noted that, “the program evolved into an extended family for its participants.” (p. 3)

The collaboration of Catholic Charities Maine Refugee & Immigration Services (RIS) and Maine Time Bank (MTB) resulted in a solid plan of action whose merits have been recognized, in the form of grant awards, by two local foundations. Prior to hire at RIS, the Elder Refugee Outreach Coordinator (EROC) was one of the original members of MTB, having joined in 1997, and as such she brings a deep understanding and personal experience of the potential for this alternative economic and social service system to support life. Early in 2005 she brought

together Time Banks USA founder Edgar Cahn and RIS Executive Director Pierrot Rugaba, who agreed that a collaboration would further the central missions of both organizations. RIS became a MTB member organization making it possible for the agency to request services from MTB members on behalf of RIS older refugee clients. The EROC brought the relationship of RIS and MTB to a new level in May 2006 with a proposal to create a staff position for a cultural broker / service exchange broker. The goal of the position is to establish and foster an active time banking exchange program between the agency, RIS, and the 750 MTB members. Through an anticipated high rate of weekly exchanges older refugee clients will receive much needed services that would otherwise be beyond the social service system to provide, or client ability to purchase. Important aims of this project are significant enhancement of elder case management resources as well as increased client self-sufficiency and well-being.

In April 2007 a Memorandum of Agreement (see Appendix) was signed and the following month grants which will partially fund a cultural broker / service exchange broker position were awarded from the Maine Community Foundation (\$4,000) and the Samuel Cohen Foundation (\$5,000), contingent on securing additional funds sufficient for a half-time salary. (see Appendix for award letters)

In May of this year the Lewiston community-based service exchange project was initiated with guidance from MTB, and under the umbrella of a DHHS System of Care program. Called THRIVE, this 6-year funded program recognizes the value of informal community services to families with at risk members who need social service supports. Their family coordinator writes “our time bank will include the refugee and immigrant population as they are a group that our

System of Care is looking to involve.” They are excited to collaborate with RIS in building a sustainable service exchange program that will benefit older refugees living in the Lewiston / Auburn area.

Thus RIS has strong partners in both Portland and Lewiston: the Maine Time Bank, with ten year history and 750 active members; and THRIVE’s new Lewiston Time Bank, backed by a 6-year funded social services program (2005-2012). Going forward RIS’s Elder Services Project proposes two half-time cultural broker / service exchange brokers based separately in Portland and Lewiston and working closely with MTB and THRIVE respectively. Positions will be filled by qualified former refugees who will have high credibility with the refugee communities, creating trust and safety for elderly refugee clients who receive services. In Lewiston a bilingual Somali / English service exchange broker will be hired, to best serve the primarily Somali refugee community in that area.

The time line of the Elder Services community-based service exchange program includes hiring and training two cultural broker / service exchange brokers within the first 30 days. Recruitment of existing Time Bank members will happen in the first three months and refugee resettlement training will be provided to members making a year commitment. Active service exchanges between committed MTB members and the older refugee clients arranged by the service exchange broker and filtered through RIS case managers to insure safety and cultural sensitivity begin in the third month and continue with increasing frequency throughout the year.

At the six month mark, focus groups will be conducted to identify the level of engagement with older refugees to insure their involvement in giving back to the surrounding community. At nine

months as services continue to grow in support of older refugees, additional local funding sources will be identified and proposals sent to granting organizations. And at twelve months the program will be presented as a model for implementation through local Time Banks nationwide.

Success in delivering services to older refugees will be evidenced by increased mental and physical health of this population, as a result of partaking in the benefits of their surrounding American community. This will be statistically measured by the number of service exchanges as recorded in the MTB TimeKeeper software.