

# The International Institutes: A National Movement of Resettlement and Inclusion



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SAVING LIVES



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*Excerpted from “Out of Many, One - A History of the Immigration and Refugee Services of America Network,” 1998, IRSA, by Margi Dunlap and Nicholas Montalto. (Note that IRSA changed its name to US Committee for Refugees & Immigrants-USCRI in 2004.) Post-1998 information is adapted from USCRI publications and other materials.*

# WELCOME

With America's population now drawn from virtually every corner of the world, our nation must grapple with both the promise and risk of being a global society. The International Institutes and other members of the USCRI network are frequently called on to serve as valuable resources to national policy makers, local communities, governmental bodies, and human service agencies.

The USCRI network spans 20 states. It includes more than 30 member agencies and field offices with the USCRI headquarters located in Washington D.C. Each year, through members and field offices, more than 1 million immigrants are provided with vital adjustment services. Services include refugee resettlement, job placement, English classes, citizenship, immigration counseling, small business development, housing, health, youth and elderly support, and cultural activities. Positive community impact from these services is high.

As pioneers in the field of diversity, these agencies are also an important link in local partnerships. Many of the partner agencies are key consultants on a broad range of issues affecting communities across the United States. Today the USCRI network continues to promote Our nation's core belief of "Out of Many, One."



## BEGINNINGS

In the first two decades of the last century, 15 million people immigrated to the United States. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) recognized the need for specialized services for the foreign-born, creating a department of Immigrant and Foreign Communities to oversee field office projects called International Institutes. Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, a predecessor of the affiliated agency there today, created a model for meeting immigrant needs: it was located in an immigrant neighborhood, provided social and humanitarian services, taught English, and created opportunities for cultural expression and civic growth.

Edith Terry Bremer, learning from this model, started the first International Institute in New York City in 1911. By 1925, there were 55 International Institutes in the United States, primarily in the industrial northeast, Midwest, and in California, which even then led the nation in immigrant population, with 52 percent of Californians being immigrants and their children.



Today, these pioneers are joined by immigrant-serving projects in Travelers and Immigrants Aid Societies, YMCAs, Nationalities Service Centers, and others to form the US Committee for Refugees & Immigrants (USCRI) partnership of organizations.

In the early years of the International Institute movement, three themes coalesced to become its guiding principles. They endure today.

## PROMOTING ETHNIC IDENTITY & LEADERSHIP

Staffing at the International Institutes reflected the national and linguistic mix in each community. Mrs. Bremer saw each nationality group as having its own psychological unity. Her goal was not to create an amalgamation of groups but to recognize the unique identity of each group as the basis for work done together. With national and ethnic identity as the starting point, newcomers could build their path toward US Citizenship on a firm foundation.

Hiring honored the value of ethnic and cultural identity. Immigrant workers were hired as “nationality secretaries.” The Institutes started a tradition of training, leadership development, and upward mobility for immigrant leaders.

In Jersey City, Italian and Polish immigrants were represented; in Bridgeport, Italian and Slovak. In Indiana, Gary had Czech and Bulgarian staff. Akron had Albanian and Serbian. In Providence, Armenian and Portuguese people worked for the International Institute in their communities. San Francisco had Greek, Russian, and Chinese nationality secretaries.



## BEING INCLUSIVE

If all nationalities were respected, all would also be included. Young Women’s Christian Associations, by their name alone, created a dilemma for the growing International Institute movement: age, gender, and religion. In 1933, the International Institutes voted to separate from the YWCAs, and Edith Terry Bremer became the first Executive Secretary of the independent National Institute of Immigrant Welfare. The new organization would serve people of both genders and all ages and would not align itself with any religion because immigrant groups represented so many faiths.

## TEACHING DEMOCRACY & SELF-RELIANCE

By the end of its first 20 years, the International Institute movement had formed an identity of its own: the movement was multiethnic, power was shared, and the richness of diverse culture and identities was valued. It was committed to empowering immigrant community leaders with training and authority within the organization. The movement was non-sectarian, open to a wide array of religious and philosophical belief systems brought from all over the world.



Teaching democracy and self-reliance has been at the core of the International Institute movement. All participants share a voice in the governance of the organization. This experience of self-governance and equal representation forms the basis for an evolving set of democratic principles as newcomers move toward becoming fully participating citizens.

And in the time ahead, these principles would be essential. The relatively friendly welcome for people willing to immigrate to the United States evident in the early decades of the twentieth century would soon give way to a rise of Nativism resulting in restrictive legislation and policies.

## AMERICANIZATION OR PLURALISM

As the young International Institutes were becoming established at the beginning of the First World War, the United States imposed a literacy requirement on all immigrants. The test required that immigrants be literate in their own languages – not necessarily English. The imposition of this test marked the beginning of a turning tide in public opinion that would threaten the nature of the work of the Institutes and introduce a necessary advocacy role into the task of the movement.

In 1921, the United States for the first time set quotas, i.e., caps on allowable immigration based on an immigrant's country of origin. The number of immigrants allowed to enter was cut in half. In 1924, an expanded national origins quota system was imposed, halving again the number of allowable immigrants. The US Border

Patrol was created. Immigration to the United States in 1925 was less than a quarter of what it had been every year of the previous decade.

A movement began to “Americanize” the newcomers who were already here. Americanization meant everything from speaking only English to eating with knives and forks instead of chopsticks.

International Institutes around America opposed efforts to strip immigrants of their own cultural and linguistic heritage. Alice Sickness, director of the International Institute in St. Paul, Minnesota, believed that true Americanization was a two-way street, with people learning from one another. Thus, new immigrants and people who had been here longer could work together to develop a new and better vision through sharing strengths and resources in an open, democratic society. Raymond Mohl, a historian who studied the immigrant aid movement, defined this position as “cultural pluralism.” Ethnic diversity is good when coupled with a responsibility to build unity in diversity.

The Americanization movement of the 1920s and 1930s taught us the price to be paid when immigrants are expected to discard linguistic and cultural identities and assume new ones not yet fully knit together with the old. During this time, many immigrant children were taught to be ashamed of their parents’ background. Parents hid their cultural history from their children, leaving a generation with unanswered questions about family origins. We learned that language, culture, and identity are not either/or propositions but complex mosaics.

The USCRI network was deeply affected by the economic collapse of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. From 1931 to 1946 there would not be a single year when more than 100,000 people would enter the country as immigrants. The work of the International Institutes continued, becoming an essential community resource in bleak times. As the country struggled to survive the depression, the USCRI network became the meeting ground – the bridge between diverse yet similarly challenged groups.

## A MEETING GROUND FOR ALL PEOPLES

Immigration came to a virtual standstill in the difficult years between the two World Wars. At the same time, the millions who had arrived in the United States during the first 20 years of the century were taking steps to become American citizens. This great cohort of immigrants had been in the country from 10 to 20 years. Many had fought in the First World War. Now they were



working, struggling to make ends meet, raising their families. The United States had become their home. They were ready to meet their neighbors. Many programs of the USCRI network created opportunities for people from many different backgrounds to come together. The Institutes made space available for ethnic associations and organized hundreds of cultural groups.

During the Depression, these groups focused on the basics such as cooking, sewing, and child care. There were also groups with the arts as a centerpiece. They focused on dance, plays, music, and literature. Participants often used their experience as immigrants as the stimulus for plays and songs. There were puppet-making classes for children and tap-dancing classes for Chinese girls in San Francisco who were determined to audition for the “Forbidden City” tap dance troupe.

The Institutes supported the growth of mutual aid associations and ethnic leadership councils. In 1930, the Boston Council was established with 15 different ethnic associations represented. This “group work” had benefits both as social support systems and as an experience of representative democracy. USCRI’s partner agency in Cincinnati began New Citizens Day in 1932 and celebrated with at least seven nationalities showcasing cultural talents.

Throughout the USCRI network, Swedes watched Mexicans dance and asked to join in. Yugoslavs and Poles learned Christmas carols together. Greeks and Chinese wrote a play together about waiting for their citizenship interviews.



# CELEBRATIONS



To promote civic unity and intergroup understanding, agencies began hosting cultural fairs. The gatherings gave members of nationality groups an opportunity to share something of their identity and cultural pride: where they came from, what they ate, what they wore, their music and dance, and who they had been before coming to America. And despite the ongoing national debate about immigration and its impact, neighbors and friends and local officials and the press were ready to come and see.

In 1920, in St. Louis, Missouri, the first of the network's "Festival of Nations" events was held. It was called the International May Festival, later renamed International

Folkfest and finally in 2001 changed to Festival of Nations. The great Minnesota Festival of Nations, the largest in the country, was started by the International Institute of Minnesota in 1932.

The International Institute in Milwaukee began a Holiday Folk Fair in 1943 to demonstrate that people of different ethnic backgrounds, religions, and political views could work together in harmony. The donated labor of volunteers made the fairs possible. As they grew, the planning challenge and its joyful resolution proved this premise.

The growth of successful ethnic festivals and fairs throughout the USCRI network during the 1930s and 1940s showed that despite a diminished flow of new immigrants, the International Institutes' mission to help newcomers to build new lives in the United States continued and grew. Creating opportunities to celebrate and share one's cultural identity helped to create a new American identity. And the host communities joined in the celebrations and were enriched by them as well.

# RESPONDING TO MIGRATION CRISES

The horrors of the Second World War in Europe, Africa, and Asia had shaped the lives of Americans. When the war ended, a new cycle in the life of the USCRI network would begin.

In 1946, President Truman proposed that some 40,000 immigrant quota slots in Europe, half of the total, be set aside for displaced people who were victims of war. He asked for the help of voluntary agencies in the US to provide sponsorship for “suffering and homeless refugees of all faiths.” Six months into the effort, it became clear that the scope of the suffering was too great for this limited response. The US resettlement program would have to go beyond the existing limited quota system to respond effectively to the needs of these refugees.

When the Displaced Person Act of 1948 passed, it changed the role of USCRI network agencies forever. The government differentiated between immigration policy and refugee policy and recruited the assistance of community organizations in a resettlement partnership that lasts to this day.

Between 1948 and the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, more than 2.2 million refugees and displaced people were admitted to the United States under 19 different versions of legislative authority. USCRI assisted in these efforts across the country. In communities of every size and composition, newcomers were welcomed, assisted with housing and jobs, and taught the basic skills that would make it possible for them to move toward citizenship.

The passage of the Refugee Act of 1980 ushered in a new era in protections for people pushed across international borders because of war.

The resettlement in the United States of Southeast Asians, Africans, Cubans, Eastern Europeans, Gulf War Iraqis, and refugees from the break-up of the Soviet Union would save lives and families in the decades that followed.

Today, while the refugee groups admitted to the United States reflect new populations of concern, including Bhutanese, Somalis, Burmese, and Iraqis, the USCRI network continues to fulfill a vision to help refugees and other immigrants become new Americans.



# MOVING TOWARD TOMORROW

USCRI's network responds to the needs of the times to ensure that bridges are built between culture and communities.

The insights and skills that the network has acquired in dealing with diversity during the last century have positioned USCRI to address some of the most important challenges facing America in the new century. The belief in the compatibility of unity and diversity - and in the necessity of building unity while preserving diversity - is as essential today as it was 100 years ago.



## TIMELINE



1910 - The National Board of the YWCA creates the Department of Immigration and Foreign Communities to oversee field projects called International Institutes to serve the foreign-born.

1911 - Edith Terry Bremer starts the first International Institute in New York City, modeling her work on Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago.

1914 - Literacy in primary or English language is required for the first time of all immigrants admitted to the United States.

1920 - International Institute of St. Louis, Missouri, established the previous year, is the first to hold a "Festival of Nations," bringing together diverse communities of foreign- and native-born Americans.

1921 - Immigration Act adopted; it sets the first numerical restrictions on immigration; reducing immigration and capping it at 350,000 and skews admission toward Northwest Europeans.

1924 - National Origins Act further cuts the overall quota by reducing the



percentage of foreign-born who can enter the United States. US Border Patrol is created to address undocumented immigration.

1933 - International Institutes vote to separate from YWCA and become the National Institute of Immigrant Welfare (NIIW). Edith Terry Bremer is its first Executive Secretary.

1948 - Displaced Person Act is signed, enabling 400,000 European World War II refugees to resettle in the U.S.

1953 - Refugee Relief Act allows 214,000 refugees fleeing Communist persecution to enter the U.S. Ellis Island, symbol of the large migrations of the 1900s, closes.

1958 - The Common Council for American Unity merges with the American Federation of International Institutes to create the American Council for Nationalities Service (ACNS), predecessor of USCRI.

1965 - Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 is enacted. It replaces the national origins quota with hemispheric limits. A preference system gives priority to family members of citizens and permanent residents and to those with relevant job skills. The Act relaxes the restrictive immigration system of the 1920s.

1975 - The Fall of Saigon spurs emergency legislation admitting 130,000 refugees, most of whom are Vietnamese.



1980 - Refugee Act of 1980 broadens the definition of a refugee to conform to the 1967 United Nations Protocol on refugees. U.S. policy admits refugees regardless of natural origin and focuses largely on family reunification and humanitarian concerns.

1981 - Established in 1958, the U.S. Committee for Refugees, a public information program for refugee protection and assistance, merges with ACNS, a predecessor of USCRI.

1986 - Immigration Reform and Control Act provides amnesty to undocumented people who resided in the country since 1982, regularizing the status of 3 million people.

1990 - Immigration Act of 1990 revamps legal immigration system, expanding to 700,000 the number of annual immigrant visas, not including refugees. The Act places an even greater emphasis on family reunification, increases limits for highly skilled workers, and includes a “diversity clause,” which provides for the entry of citizens from “adversely affected countries.”

1994 - American Council for Nationalities Services becomes Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA).

1996 - Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act includes provisions for summary exclusions of undocumented entrants. Related welfare reform legislation prevents certain legal immigrants from receiving public benefits.



1997 - Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act softens the harsh impact on the 1996 immigration law for certain asylum seekers from Central America and elsewhere. In addition, some public benefits are restored for certain legal immigrants.

2001 - On September 11, terrorists strike in New York City and Washington DC. The tragedy is felt worldwide as US airplanes are grounded and refugee resettlement to the US comes to a grinding halt.

2002 - Grappling in the aftermath of the 9-11 tragedy, Congress adopts the USA Patriot Act which includes provisions which will negatively impact the rights of immigrants. Refugee resettlement, which was called to a halt in September, begins again in late Spring, although at a far slower pace than previously.

2004 - IRSA changes its name to US Committee for Refugees & Immigrants (USCRI)

2005 - Congress adopts the REAL ID Act which includes provisions which will further negatively impact refugee admissions. USCRI introduces the National Center for Refugee & Immigrant Children which provides pro bono legal and social services to unaccompanied children released from detention in the United States. Comprehensive Immigration Reform, sponsored by Senators Kennedy and McCain, is defeated.

2006 - As a consequence of “material support” exclusions in federal legislation, actual refugee admissions drop to 58% of the Congressionally-approved ceiling.

2008 - Refugee resettlement numbers rose again to the highest levels seen since 9-11. In 2008, more than 60,000 were resettled and in 2009 the total topped 70,000.

2010 - In spite of a weakened economy and rising anti-immigrant sentiment, the USCRI network expects to resettle its highest number of refugees in more than a decade – good news for refugees who have been languishing in camps around the world sometimes for a generation or more. Network directors reaffirm that the value of the movement is as important today as a century ago.





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