

OPB News

Nursing Program Helps Refugees Get Out Of Poverty

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Highly skilled refugees and immigrants in the Northwest rarely find themselves working in the professions they pursued in their native country.

Most end up with minimum wage jobs like housekeeping. That kind of work keeps them living in poverty.

The bad economy makes that struggle even harder. But one program in Oregon is giving refugees and immigrants who used to be nurses, a chance to return to their profession.

As part of our long term focus on poverty in the Northwest, Sadie Babits reports on the **WIIN program**.

When patients leave the hospital, they can fill out a comment card about the service they received.

Iryna Zhgya gets a lot of these comments. She's keeps them in a binder in her home in Oregon City. Zhgya sits at her dining room table and pulls out one comment card from one especially difficult patient. Iryna Zhgya: "At the end he said "Iryna is an excellent RN and she knows how to be firm but yet gentle."

She learned those skills back in Ukraine.

Iryna Zhgya: "I knew how to take care of patients. I was a nurse. I knew how to turn people every two hours and how to watch for the sores on their body."

Nursing in the U.S. it turns out isn't all that different from being a nurse in another country. The ideas are the same – you're making sure a patient's needs are met. Zhyga's been doing that most of her life. But her career as a nurse took a detour when the Soviet Union collapsed and instability set in where she lived.

Iryna Zhgya: "I remember like I was so afraid. I put my children on the floor one of the nights, I was afraid to go to another room. I sit on my knees and I say 'dear Lord take me to the place where you want me to be.'"

Zhyga talks a lot about her faith. It's what gave her and her family the courage to leave Ukraine as refugees and eventually resettle in Portland.

Zhyga came here barely able to speak English. She had twin daughters to support and she couldn't even drive a car. She was struggling as a single mom to make ends meet when she found out about the WIIN program. That's short for **Workforce Improvement with Immigrant Nurses**.

Judy Anderson: "The idea started a long time ago in healthcare with many of us in getting more diversity into the workplace particularly into the RN workforce."

That's Judy Anderson. She's the director of WIIN. Her office walls at **Clackamas Community College** are decorated with ethnic dresses given to her by former students. And sitting on one of her shelves are tiny flags representing 27 nationalities that have come through this program.

Judy Anderson: "All over everything from Siberia to Micronesia."

Anderson says she keeps the classes small. Only about 12 to 14 students get picked for the one-year program.

Students learn communication and time management skills and they take refresher courses on nursing. Anderson says most of them work full time, go to school and raise children.

Judy Anderson: "They love nursing. They want to take care of patients. They are hard workers. They have very complicated lives and in spite of everything they overcome the obstacles. And almost all of them that we admit to the program end up with their nursing licenses."

Iryna Zhgya: "We didn't know if we would become nurses here. We didn't know if our English was good enough for the patients. But the faith that Judy had in us, it was a lot."

WIIN is one of ten re-entry programs for foreign educated nurses around the country including one in the Puget Sound.

Lisa Snodderly is the nursing recruitment director at Providence Health Care in Portland. She says there's a national shortage of nurses as baby boomers retire.

There are plenty of new graduates entering the workforce to replace them but there's a growing need for experienced nurses – that's where the WIIN program comes in.

Lisa Snodderly: "What I see this group offering us besides the fact that they can offer us diversity. They have experience as a nurse, although in a very different setting but they still have those skills where they learned how to prioritize all the stuff you have to learn as a nurse they bring that."

Iryna Zhyga has those skills. She graduated from the WIIN program more than 3 years ago. Now she has a well-paying job at a nursing home in Portland. Back when she was poor, she never dreamed of this life. Her twin daughters just graduated from high school at the age of sixteen. And a year ago Zhyga bought her first home.

Iryna Zhgya: “When we bought it, I walked around, I came with two suitcases and two children to this country and had nothing and I was able to grow here and have a place that I can call home.”

It’s a home that few immigrants and refugees ever experience. According to the Washington D.C.-based think tank Migration Policy Institute, more than a million college-educated immigrants living in the U.S. are unemployed or working in minimum wage jobs.

Anderson says WIIN helps give immigrants like Zhyga a chance to leave poverty behind and return to a career path they thought might be lost forever.

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