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where refugees sought services and a wider sense of belonging.

In true Malheur County fashion, local residents saw no other choice than to step up in place of governmental assistance to get their new neighbors acclimated.

"We started getting community members together to figure out how we could administer to these refugees and welcome them, integrate them, and it's turned into something really big," said Matt Singer, executive director at Four Rivers Cultural Center. "We received grants, have opened a welcome center and have employees now."

Less than a year after opening the Welcome Center, what started as a grassroots and entirely volunteer-run undertaking has flourished into a bustling community center with four workforce specialists on staff and a full-time director.

"It changed overnight," said center director Renee Cummings whose employment is funded by a grant awarded to the Four Rivers Cultural Center. Not long after opening in May, Portland-based Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) reached out to connect with the local community and offer further support.

"They've been trying to get to this area to serve it for a while and they finally got it approved. (IRCO) is the employer of the staff, except for me," Cummings said.

"It probably should have been the Housing Authority or Department of Human Services that brought it to everyone's attention, but it just didn't happen that way. I think some families moved (from the area) that maybe didn't find what they wanted while they were here, so I think there were more families than there are now, but I would say there are probably 50 to 75 total (refugee) families here with varying degrees of interaction with the community."

Jarjees, a refugee from Iraq, was hired by the Welcome Center alongside Ekram Ahmed, Abdikadir Abdi and Jaafar Raheem, who sought refuge from turmoil in Sudan, Somalia and Iraq. But long before being paid to help, Jarjees helped voluntarily and assisted Elias and his family with finding a place to live in Malheur County.

"He was renting a very small apartment in (El Cajon) for \$1,100 and when he came here, he felt better," Jarjees said. "(The family) felt comfortable and he had a full-time job. Over there, he earned about \$180 a week (through Welfare-to-Work) and here almost \$800 in two weeks."

Like many newcomers to the area, the refugee community was particularly drawn in by the hopes of receiving Section 8 assistance. Although Elias was eligible for Section 8 in San Diego County and arrived before the wait list was closed, when he reapplied in Malheur County, he learned his take-home pay exceeded the annual limit and was no longer able to receive benefits.

"It (doesn't) make sense," Jarjees said. "The whole year, only \$100 extra, and that's the reason he didn't get approved. After that, he lowered his hours at work."

The domino effect

Although Elias has successfully applied for and received food stamp benefits of \$540 per month for his family of five, he's had great difficulty receiving public assistance he's otherwise eligible for and navigating



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At top, Sarmad Elias (left) listens to his brother-in-law, Melad Jarjees, who helps translate for the family. Lower left, Seror Abdullah plays with their baby, Steve. Above, the Four Rivers Welcome Center has become a hub for helping refugees find assistance and resettle in Ontario.

the winding web of governmental administration.

"This is America!" Elias said. "Anybody (who) hears about America from afar says 'Wow,' but when (I came) here, there was too much stuff we needed to do. (It) feels like here, they want to break you."

In San Diego, the family received assistance through TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, while Elias was participating in the Welfare-to-Work program. Even though he was working, he was still under the income cap.

Once working a full-time job in Ontario, he was no longer eligible for services until he suddenly had to leave his job for hernia surgery. Upon reapplying for TANF, he learned he still had an open case with the Department of Human Services in San Diego. He thought he had resolved it, but he had to wait for that case to expire before applying again. It was the check he was waiting on to pay the rent.

At home, Elias said, his landlord failed to fix ongoing issues with the rodents, air conditioning and faulty electricity. When he tried to move, the landlord threatened to charge him a \$1,000 fee for breaking the

lease.

On top of their financial struggles, the family's older sons have both been diagnosed with autism and are receiving inadequate support. They saw a specialist for Farrah, 9, in January in Boise. They had to wait until July for a follow-up appointment and are still waiting for a referral to see an Ontario-based doctor.

Elias, 11, has a more difficult time breaking away from his routines at home and gets teased so severely that he no longer wants to go to school. He's often fixated on religion and Christian prayer and verbalizes a mix of reality and imagination. His frustrations can result in loud outbursts and self-directed anger. Although he's taken out of his classroom once per day to work with a specialist, it's the other hours of the day when most issues arise.

"He can't go to the school with his problems because they'll make fun of him and he could hurt himself because sometimes he slaps his face," said Jarjees. "They need Social Security to help."

Social Security's Supplemental Security Income provides assistance for children with disabilities, including autism that limits

communication and social functions.

The family said Social Security won't fix everything, but it will help make sure they can better provide for their sons while Seror stays home with them. But like Farrah's medical referral process, the family is still waiting for answers.

Elias said he wants access to services to be easier for everyone including refugees, but especially homeless communities.

"He loves America. The problem is the United States' requirements are too hard," Jarjees said. "Step by step by step by step. We need something not very easy, but something (streamlined). Like instead of five steps, what about three steps? Or two steps? Make it easier."

Even through his struggles in the U.S., Elias is reminded of the immense struggles his family has faced to get to this point. "He said he is lucky because he ran away from (ISIS.) There were bodies in the streets and directly killing people (for being Christian)," Jarjees translated. "That's why they are here."

"Sometimes I sit by myself, laughing, because I remember the old memories in Iraq and what happened to me," said Elias. "Over there and here, there is a big difference. Here, I'm free."