Internship Report on International Rescue Committee in Seattle

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**Summary**

During the summer of 2018 I had the great opportunity to intern with International Rescue Committee at its Seattle office. IRC is a U.S. based non-profit organization that helps refugees to resettle and find employment in the U.S. It also has oversea operation and it is one of the most influential NGOs that specialize in serving refugees. My capacity is at the finance and administration office. Although the finance department does not directly work with clients—refugees that IRC serves—I still had the chance to learn about the work that other departments are doing. This report explains the functions of various departments in IRC carry out and how they interact with refugees. In addition, this report also includes personal reflection.

**Finance and Administration**

Finance office is at the core of the whole office and it is essential to the everyday tasks IRC carries out. The finance office is responsible for budgeting, accounting and it also carries out human resources function. All spending towards assisting refugees, for instance, housing and purchasing bus tickets require to be approved by the finance office. In other words, the finance office monitors the everyday spending. Records of private and corporate donations to IRC can also be found in the finance office. During my time at finance department, I have helped with bank reconciliation and internal audit. I have also created and updated internal policy manual, which is a function of human resources.
I have learned that IRC Seattle office does not receive funding from its headquarter in New York, that is to say, the Seattle office has to raise funding on its own or attract donations. Many of funding comes from corporate business as well as state grants. In Seattle’s case, Starbucks and Microsoft have generously given IRC grants to maintain programs. The grants are generally not restricted to specific purposes. The development office of IRC is responsible for event fundraising and it is time to talk about them.

Development Office

The development office of IRC is responsible for several important tasks. It includes event organizing, volunteer coordination and managing corporate relationship. Since fundraising has an important role in maintaining most types of non-profits like IRC, it has been given great emphasis. Fundraising events are important and the development team puts a lot of efforts in them. They are great ways to engage business donors, private donors and also clients. It is also a great way to advocate the issues on refugees and attract more supporters.

IRC is also supported by on call volunteers and interns to a great extent. According to the development team, it is almost impossible for IRC to carry out its tasks and various programs without the help of volunteers. They come from different and very diverse backgrounds and bring different perspectives and knowledge to IRC. Seattle IRC has attracted a large number of volunteers by words of mouth from previous volunteers and through online platforms like Facebook. Volunteers usually return after volunteering once. Volunteers have told IRC that
contributing to the mission of IRC and helping refugees have greatly shaped their
personal experience and even professional goals and beyond. The screening process
for selecting volunteers and interns is in placed. It includes a background check and
staff interviews. Volunteers bring different skills and IRC often pairs the skills with
tasks. They also receive training on cultural sensitivity, trauma awareness and so on.

**Intensive Case Management (ICM)**

Intensive Case Management department is a special team within IRC that serves
those most vulnerable, which includes refugees with urgent medical needs, single
parent household, victims of domestic violence and human trafficking as well as
LGBTQ minorities. One example of ICM’s assistance to those with urgent medical
needs is one Iraqi boy with kidney failure. ICM connected with the children’s
hospital and it took care of the boy for several months. The boy eventually received
the kidney transplant. Later on, a catholic organization in Capitol Hill took the family
in and they have integrated well within the community since then.

When dealing with ICM clients, the caseworkers have to pay extra attention
to cultural difference and norms. One example is that men from certain countries
tend not to hold hands with unfamiliar women because of religious belief and
customs. So ICM caseworkers might not hold hands with clients when greeting. It is
also important not to over promise clients so they could have a very high
expectation. It is to avoid disappointment and distrust in ICM caseworkers. Instead,
it is necessary for ICM caseworkers to follow through different stages and provide
follow up information to the clients. The caseworkers should communicate with clients clearly about what can be achieved soon and what cannot come soon.

Clients often feel anxious and have cultural shocks when they first arrived in the U.S. ICM caseworkers work to help clients to adjust to new environment. It is also difficult to keep the refugee family financially stable. The low-income housing is hard to attain because the waitlist is too long and it can take a long time to get housing application approved. Clients can lose patience and it is caseworkers’ responsibility to comfort them. Each refugee receives 1000 dollars in cash when they first arrive in the U.S; however, it is a one-time offer and it can only cover the rent for the first few months. Although refugees qualify for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the quantity of cash is still insufficient to cover Seattle’s skyscraping rent cost. To mitigate the burdens, IRC HQ has given some funds to Seattle ICM program to cope with the housing crisis.

There are several refugee community organizations that help with housing issues. It makes efforts to prevent the refugees from becoming homeless. For instance, Refugee Women Alliance, Iraqi Community Center, Mother Africa and Partner and Employment are all parts of the endeavors. The King’s county also offers some grants to IRC. Refugees in Washington are qualified for basic health insurance and food stamp, so the most concerning factor is housing and employment. Seattle also offers many free services to refugees, like free ESL courses.

Caseworkers’ jobs are challenging. It can be about logistics and coping between reality and clients’ expectation. It is sometimes the case that newly arrived refugees show less willingness to work at low skilled jobs that IRC finds by using its
resources; it is because the refugees took higher skill jobs and are well educated in their home country. However, the refusal can jeopardize the relationship between IRC and employers, which can hinder future employment opportunity for other refugees.

**Washington Anti-trafficking Response Network (WARN)**

Washington Anti-trafficking Response Network is a department within IRC. It also receives funds from Department Of Justice and Washington State. WARN is the largest agency in Washington to assist human trafficking victims, who might have suffered from forced labor and forced prostitution. IRC serves both U.S. citizens and other nationals. WARN works to advocate for legal, psychological and financial needs for their clients. In addition, WARN works close with Seattle Police department, Department of Homeland Securities and it has a close partnership with attorney general’s office. Northwest Immigrant Rights Project also refers human trafficking victims to WARN after a careful assessment of the situation. Unfortunately, it is often common that victims have undergone great trauma from their past experience. To deal with this issue, WARN can refer them for therapy if the clients are willing to undergo counseling. WARN also assists clients with medical needs. It has close relationship with Swedish Medical Center, which provides medical cares for WARN clients even though they might not have health insurance. Seattle Police department also works with WARN to help human trafficking victims
and it often refers them to WARN. Prosecutors also work with WARN in holding human trafficking perpetrators accountable. They meet frequently to discuss about counter-human-trafficking. They also apply joint funding, each targeting different aspects of counter-human-trafficking. Currently WARN serves 120 clients in average each year. Yet there are much more victims who WARN can’t help due to limited funding. Currently, WARN is working towards getting more funding in the future to help more victims of human trafficking.

**Personal Reflection**

Through my experience at IRC, there are several highlights. One is that I went to the International Refugee Day event hosted by IRC in downtown Seattle. The event was in a spacious modern café setting, with large garden and public space. Artists who were clients of IRC exhibited their work and they were fabulous. Food and drinks were served with the help of volunteers. I was quiet surprised by the number of people who showed up, considering the current politic atmosphere towards refugees and immigrants, I would not assume such popularity. To the contrary, many refugees, IRC staff, supporters and volunteers came, including children and the elders. The local media also had its presence at the event. The atmosphere was lively as many were chatting with each other and laughing. At that event, I began to feel the joy of accomplishment made by IRC in the past years and its meaningful purposes. The other highlight was that I helped with reception one day. When I was there, someone told us that there was a cake in the fridge, bought by a client who just got a job because of IRC’s help. I had a bite of the cake and it
was delicious. This is such a trivial thing but it nonetheless made me happy for both the client and the employment team of IRC.

As I mentioned in the summary, the work I have done mostly focused on finance and administration; thus, the work itself did not have much dynamics. Yet, it taught me to be very cautious and through and also patient. Finance is the core of operation of any company so I carried out my task very carefully. At last, I have established a close relationship with my supervisors, who are kind and supportive through my whole experience at IRC. “We help each other”, they said. As it should be in a greater sense: we ought to help each other in this world, as it is the mission of IRC, MIIS and so many others.