

**nileSisters**  
DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

**A Hand Up  
Not a Handout**





**nileSisters**  
DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Nile Sisters Development Initiative is a community-based organization that provides vital services to refugees and immigrants in the San Diego region. The NSDI mission is to educate, support, and offer training to refugee and immigrant women and their families to help them overcome barriers to social and economic self-reliance. Founded in 2001, NSDI assists refugees and immigrants to assimilate a new language, customs, and systems that are inherent to the American way of life. Between 2013 and 2015, NSDI assisted 5,600 refugees and immigrants through essential programs including our employment facilitation program, B2B. The program prepares refugees and other hard-to-reach populations in underserved communities for increased employment potential, which helps cultivate a strong and diverse workforce.

**Nile Sisters Development Initiative | 6035 University Avenue, Suite 22 | San Diego, CA 92115-6343 | (619) 265-2959**

[nilesisters.org](http://nilesisters.org)

# A Hand Up, Not a Handout

## Expanding Healthcare Career Pathways to Refugees in San Diego County

### Background

Refugees and other displaced populations face a myriad of challenges in finding gainful employment and becoming self-sufficient as they assimilate to a different culture in their new communities. Many refugees often struggle with complex U.S. systems, including navigating the employment process. Consequently, many are marginally attached to the labor force. A primary reason for this is known as the 'refugee gap,' a gap in employment rates or occupational status and earnings within the refugee populations in comparison to other immigrants. Aside from language barriers, this gap prominently exists because of lack of education and technical skills desirable in the United States job market. [1] Because labor market integration is relatively less successful for this particular population, Nile Sisters Development Initiative (NSDI) initiated a program called Back to Back (B2B) Skill Development program in 2012 as a means of providing access to various skill training for refugees and immigrants in the San Diego region, the State of California's largest refugee resettlement site. [2] Within this over-arching program is the California Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Vocational Training program, in which NSDI subsidizes training for qualified candidates so they can become equipped with the skills necessary to obtain gainful healthcare career in the U.S. job market.

### Promoting Health Care Career Opportunities

NSDI developed the CNA program based on several needs analyses conducted by private and public entities. A report by Live Well San Diego, a County of San Diego initiative, indicates that only 13% of refugees entered full-time employment in 2015. [3] This results in many newcomers surviving on the economic fringe, either unemployed or receiving public assistance. To address the need for asset-building opportunities, NSDI conducted a community survey which revealed that members of the refugee populations want sustainable and gainful employment in the health care sector, an industry projected to grow in the San Diego region.

According to San Diego Workforce Partnership, the County's local workforce development board, health care careers are one of five priority sector professions in San Diego County, and CNAs specifically are categorized as an in-demand career, with the projected employment rate increasing from 9,636 (current as of 2016) to 10,467 by 2019. [4]

Per the United States Census Bureau, the U.S. will experience significant growth in its population of individuals 65 and older between 2012 and 2050; it is estimated to reach approximately 84 million by 2050. [5] Because baby boomers need elderly care, there is a demonstrated need for qualified health care workers. Not only are CNAs greatly desired and needed, but they are in a very lucrative industry overall. CNA is the first step on the nursing career ladder, so an individual who gains this license has greater accessibility to become a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) and eventually a Registered Nurse (RN). Eighty-nine percent of surveyed students who have completed NSDI's CNA program have expressed interest in advancing their career in the health care field. Furthermore, the CNA participants inject much needed cultural proficiency in the healthcare field, especially in resettlement hubs such as San Diego, which has an estimated refugee population of 150,000. [6]

The field of nursing is needed in every community in the U.S.; therefore, should refugees and immigrants choose to relocate to other communities, they will have transferable skills that will allow them to gain employment in their new home. NSDI has taken note of this, and since 2012, has created partnerships with two accredited institutions in San Diego County in order to offer an expedited and robust 22-day CNA training to qualified candidates. These partnerships offer tuition reductions from \$2,200 to \$1,600 and \$1,700, respectively. Out of that reduced price, students pay \$600 as a buy-in fee, which also ensures the viability of the program.

NSDI offers flexible payment plans on individual basis. By leveraging existing resources and obtaining investments from other entities, NSDI is able to cover the rest of the fees which reduces the financial burden for the target communities. Although fast paced, the rapidity of the course ensures that newly arrived refugees and immigrants can gain technical skills in a short amount of time and thus, begin the transition to self-sufficiency via stable employment.

## The Screening Process

Over the years, NSDI has discovered the most effective method of receiving successful results from our CNA constituents is to implement a week long screening process prior to matriculating candidates into the program. Once selected, participants submit a nonrefundable buy-in fee. Both of these requirements ensure that the selected candidates are not only qualified and capable, but that they are also invested in the program. Additionally, interested candidates who are not selected and may require additional language support are referred to our program partner, San Diego Continuing Education (Mid-City Campus) for Vocational English as Second Language (VESL) training. Selected participants are required to attend weekly tutoring sessions and professional development workshops in order to ensure material comprehension and overall success.

The screening process consists of five major steps:

- 1 Eligibility assessment
- 2 Orientation
- 3 English test part I
- 4 Interview
- 5 English test part II

**Eligibility Assessment** Interested candidates are vetted to ensure that they meet eligibility requirements. Applicants must provide qualifying paperwork to ascertain their refugee or asylee status. Other socially disadvantaged populations may present other government records.

**Orientation** Prospective students attend a two hour orientation in order to learn about the overall program and ask any clarifying questions. This orientation includes information about NSDI requirements, as well as those from the training institution.

**English Test Part I** The second hour of the two hour orientation is the preliminary English comprehension test. Since the CNA courses are outsourced to local, private institutions, it is imperative that the students have an Advanced Beginning or higher level of English language comprehension. This test is relatively simple, and primarily consists of multiple choice questions with very minimal passage comprehension. Individuals are required to receive 80 percent or higher in order to move on to the next step.

**Interview** After individuals pass the first English comprehension test, they can sign up for a 30-minute interview with a panel consisting of NSDI staff and interns. This interview works to not only assess why the individual wishes to become a CNA, but also assembles a greater picture of their personality and current financial situation (e.g. their need for the program), as well as their linguistic capability and overall motivation to succeed.

**English Test Part II** Directly after the 30-minute interview, candidates are taken to another room where they are administered a second, more difficult English comprehension test. Unlike the first test, this test is more passage-based, and therefore, the threshold for a passing score is reduced to 70 percent.

After all steps have been completed by the candidates, NSDI's panel deliberates and selects qualified candidates to enroll in the program (the number varies based on the enrollment period).

## Success of the CNA Program

Since adopting the new orientation process in September 2014, NSDI has seen tremendous improvement in the passing rates of program participants. Between 2014 and 2015, 71% of enrolled candidates passed both the didactic and practical portions of the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Certified Nursing Assistant Certification exam; 29% passed at least one portion of the test. [ Figure 1 ] Thus far in 2016, NSDI has observed a licensing rate of 100 percent. [ Figure 2 ] To date, NSDI has assisted nearly 60 CNA students from refugee or economically underprivileged backgrounds.

The diverse participants hail from 13 different countries and represent three regions:

- 58% Africa
- 40% North America (USA and the Caribbean)
- 2% Central Asia

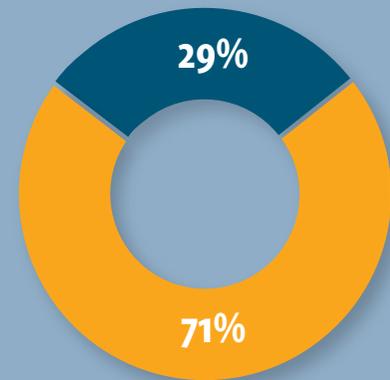
Sixty-eight percent of CNA participants are female and males account for 32%. Currently, NSDI maintains an active wait list, which includes 32 prospective participants.

Through observation, NSDI has noted that, within two months of certification, new CNAs find employment with licensed institutions. This newly found employment is noteworthy not only because of its altruistic nature, but also because constituents can start supporting themselves and their families and to wean off public assistance. Once stably employed, many students return to NSDI in order to give back to the program in the form of tutoring. Multiple CNAs who have successfully completed the program have spread their wealth of knowledge by mentoring current students in the program, providing not only technical assistance, but also cultural support.

### Figure 1

#### CNA State Exam Pass Rates 2014–15

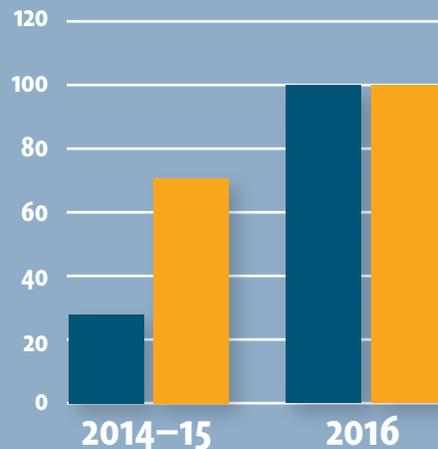
- Passed one part of the exam
- Passed both parts of the exam



### Figure 2

#### CNA State Exam Pass Rates 2014–15 Compared to 2016

- Passed one part of the exam
- Passed both parts of the exam



## Conclusion

Despite the adversities that refugees encounter on their journey to the U.S., they are eager to contribute positively to their new society. For this reason, NSDI developed the B2B Skill Development program. Since its inception in 2012, B2B has assisted more than 250 refugees and members of other economically disadvantaged populations, and nearly 25% have chosen to participate in the CNA vocational training program. The CNA program allows refugee and immigrant constituents an opportunity to obtain gainful employment in a growing sector and, thereby, become self-sufficient. Elected officials at the state and local levels have given B2B recognition. In 2015, the mayor of San Diego presented a certificate of recognition to all participants who successfully completed the program.

## Recommendations

Based on our experiences from implementing B2B, NSDI recommends the following:

### **1 Support Asset-Building Opportunities for Refugees and Other Underserved Populations**

NSDI recommends that investors support professional career development programs for refugees in the healthcare industry, a sector that is projected to grow.

### **2 Increase Support for Wrap-Around Services**

In addition to supporting skill development opportunities, NSDI recommends that investors ensure that substantial social support is available to refugees and immigrants as they pursue vocational training. Additional support may include professional development, tutoring, and intensive case management.

### **3 Introduce Different In-Demand Career Opportunities**

To ensure that refugees and immigrants have ample opportunities to thrive and succeed in their new communities, NSDI recommends that refugee-serving organizations explore other in-demand careers that offer upward mobility.

## References

[<sup>1</sup>] Ott, E. (2013, November 16).

The labour market integration of resettled refugee (Rep.).

Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/j28pmnx>

[<sup>2</sup>] Refugee Arrivals into California Counties (Issue brief). (n.d.).

Retrieved May 22, 2016, from California Department of Social Services <http://tinyurl.com/75zz3yz>

[<sup>3</sup>] Live Well San Diego. (2015).

County of San Diego Refugee Employment Services.

Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/zscajtj>

[<sup>4</sup>] San Diego Workforce Partnership—Nursing Assistants Fast Facts. (2015).

Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/zjqr5r9>

[<sup>5</sup>] Ortman, J. M., Velkoff, V. A., & Hogan, H. (2014).

An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States (Rep.).

Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/px5t2yr>

[<sup>6</sup>] Barraza, A. 2011.

Refugees in San Diego Seek Representation in Redistricting.

Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/zu7c8ox>

## Acknowledgments

CNA program funders:

Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)

The California Endowment

Women Give San Diego

CNA program partners:

International Health Group School of Nursing

Western Medical Training Center

***A Hand Up, Not a Handout*** authors:

Kimberly Castillo

Esther Ng

Paulino Paidá, MBA

