



April 3, 2019

IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE  
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

MISSION:  
TO PROMOTE THE INTEGRATION OF  
REFUGEES, IMMIGRANTS, AND THE  
COMMUNITY AT LARGE INTO A SELF-  
SUFFICIENT, HEALTHY, AND INCLUSIVE  
MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY.

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Chair Riley,  
Vice Chair Girod,  
Senators Dembrow, Hass and Olsen

My name is Alina Savchenko. I have arrived as a refugee to the US in September 2015. I'm from Ukraine. In my native country I completed a master's degree in law at the National Tax University and was a lawyer at the Law Department of the Local State Government. My responsibilities were to present governor at the court, and other state departments. Also, I had to endorse all contracts before the governor could sign them and do the many other tasks that were related to my position. Before I left my country, I had an orientation session with the US Embassy representative who said, "if anybody, who is present here is a lawyer, you cannot evaluate your diploma in the US at all, and you have to be prepared to study from the beginning". I had already overcome a lot to reach my goal and at that moment I understood, that my life would have to start from the beginning in the US. I thought that I would only be able to do simple jobs in the US because I didn't have an education that could be recognized in the US. But when I arrived in the US and came to the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, I got proposition to start volunteering at the IRCO. I did everything I could with the skills I had from my country. My Job Coach saw that I already had a lot of skills that are required by the US employment market in Portland. She recommended me to one lawyer who practiced law for more than 40 years and at that time she was helping refugees to apply for Social



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Security Benefits. She very politely refused to hire me. I completely understand her, because she had the same fears as almost everybody. I came from a country that people call a country of third world, and what I can do well in the US at all. But almost 1.5 years later, due to some circumstances I had to assist this lawyer with some of her appointments, that she did for refugees at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization. Only several appointments were enough for her to evaluate my skills: working with documents, organizing everything and preparing for these appointments. As a result, she offered me a Legal Assistant position at her lawyer office.

Another barrier that I had to overcome at first half of the year in the us was next. When I came to the one of the colleges, I was refused to be accepted for college because I didn't have a Green Card during that time. To become a Green Card holder, I have to live permanently in the US for 1 year and after one year I become eligible to apply for Green Card. I came with the Refugee status. I already was getting all public benefits, except opportunity to study at the Community College. I had to spend almost an entire night to find information from different resources and the government web sites that my status in the US allows me to use other public support and opportunity to study at the Community College. Before I came to the adviser, I had to be confident that I am eligible for that. When I brought this information on the next day, unfortunately I met other barriers from this person, but I don't want to talk about my negative experience more. I already overcame that. And I thought that was just misunderstanding with me. However, when I start to work at the Refugee Career Pathways program at the IRCO, my client is facing same problem as I had before. Again, it required additional efforts to convince specialist at the Community College that my client is eligible for Federal Assistance.

Why I am talking about my personal experience and shared experience of my clients in the US? The point of my testimony is I want to see on the legislative

level less barriers and challenges for immigrants who came to the US and highly skilled professionals in their field. I think, as soon as the US workforce starts using immigrants' knowledge and skills, then our economy will benefit.

Sincerely,

Alina Savchenko

Career Coach

Refugee Career Pathways Program