From May until August of this year, I had the privilege of serving as a Resettlement Intern at the Nationalities Service Center (NSC). The NSC has been assisting immigrants and refugees in a myriad of ways since it opened in 1921. Given the current climate and crisis of refugees around the world, the NSC is working double-time to resettle individuals and families each week. During the summer months, the pace of work increases even more due to what resettlement agencies call the “summer surge.” This summer has been a surge indeed as NSC has begun welcoming some of the first Syrian refugees to Philadelphia along with refugee families from Nepal, Bhutan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, and many others countries around the world.

As a Resettlement Intern, there was no typical daily routine. My job as a Case Aide to our Case Managers and department head was a revolving door of responsibilities and a mixed bag of tasks that often required me to fly by the seat of my pants rather than work through a predetermined protocol. My primary responsibilities included escorting clients to their resettlement-related appointments, meeting with and assisting clients that come to the NSC for walk-in appointments, working on special projects such as internal research on Core Services, and other miscellaneous work to provide to support to Case Managers. My position required me to be in regular dialogue with clients as well as Case Managers to ensure that clients’ needs were met. This kind of open communication provided me an opportunity to not only improve my language skills in Arabic, Spanish and French, but also
allowed me the chance to become accustomed to working through an interpreter or other means of communication.

The most prominent skills I developed during my internship at the Nationalities Service Center were my language skills in Arabic, French and Spanish. Given that I worked primarily with Arabic speaking clients from Syria and Iraq, I spent about half of all my time working speaking only Arabic. My constant exposure to people from regions both urban and rural in both Syria and Iraq helped me improve my vocabulary and learn to identify certain accents or alternate pronunciations of words that may have confused me in the past. Many other clients I worked with spoke French and Spanish, giving me another opportunity to grow my skills in both of those languages throughout my three months of work.

I also worked to improve my interpersonal skills in the workplace. Due to the fast pace of the summer surge and the fact that NSC is short-staffed, I was not walked through my responsibilities as thoroughly as I had expected and instead I had to learn on the job. Not being entirely sure what I was doing and what the expectations were of my work and position pushed me to rely on my relationships in the office as my resource. My close professional relationships not only with my supervisor but also with Case Managers were incredibly useful and served as a prime example of helpful and open office communication. Having been a part of that environment has prepared me to move into the next position I take with a solid understanding of what kind of relationships make an organization run well.
The special projects I took on as a resettlement intern at NSC this summer were also an exciting and rewarding part of my experience. One of the first projects I leapt into was creating an infographic comparison of two different assistance programs offered to eligible clients. Our clients were having a hard time understanding the differences between the two programs and so the Case Managers asked me to come up with a basic side-by-side comparison that illustrated what each program offered. The template I created is still in use and has been translated into several other languages. Once I completed this first project, Case Managers and other higher-ups in NSC began asking me for help in creating visual representations of important information. I created an informational brochure for landlords around the city on why they should sign leases with our clients, created flyers for events in the office, and assisted in several other graphic design oriented projects.

The biggest project I took on was heading up our internal research on Core Services—the basic elements of case management provided to clients. I lead a task force of three other interns as we examined case files from early in Fiscal Year 2016 and logged when, how and from whom clients received these Core Services. This research is ongoing and part of an agency-wide effort to increase accountability and transparency between departments so that refugees resettling in Philadelphia get what they need to build a new life. One of the most exciting parts about this project was how seriously my input was taken by my supervisor, the Resettlement Manager. After noticing an element of the study that I found to be problematic, I explained the issue and proposed an alternative. Danielle, my supervisor, agreed immediately and thanked me for my insight and attention to detail. Her
trust in my knowledge of NSC and in the quality of my work made me proud and was an exceptional moment during my internship.

Although I learned so much of my position from lived experience on the job, by the end of my summer I was certain I had made a difference in our organization and in the lives of our clients. Though I could not always solve a family’s problem or provide an answer to a particular question, I always gave them a smile and honestly explained what I could do to help. Resettling in a new country is challenging, even more so when one is fleeing a war zone or trauma, and it was not uncommon for clients to express frustration that their lives were not getting easier despite having arrived in the so-called “Land of Opportunity.” Seeing this time and time again, I believe that one of the most profound ways I impacted clients in that situation was to listen to their concerns and frustrations and apologize. A vast number of problems that clients face are caused by people they never meet or see—paperwork is not delivered to the Social Security office on time, or their electric bill arrives with incorrect charges that they cannot pay. By spending a few minutes sitting with clients and personally apologizing for an inconvenience or set back, whether I caused it or not, I put a face to even some of their faceless struggles. Each day I strived to be an accountable resource for clients and the Case Managers that worked hard to help them create a better life.

My summer as a Resettlement Intern for the Nationalities Service Center taught me many important lessons, some of which I have already discussed in this report. One that I have not yet mentioned, however, is the importance of organization. The Nationalities Service Center, like many service organizations around the world, struggles with
maintaining clear expectations of certain jobs and an organized format for interdepartmental collaboration. Having been a part of the agency for three months, I can definitively say that clients would be served better and employees would have more positive work experiences if organization was more highly prioritized. Though even with all its imperfections, the Nationalities Service Center was an incredible place to work and I am extremely grateful for my time there. It has impacted my career goals by showing me that I do not aspire to be a Case Manager or serve in that capacity, which leads me to continue pondering what type of work I would prefer to pursue. Working with refugees has been incredible and is definitely a field in which I will remain active. I must again thank the university and the donors who made this summer possible, I would never have had such a fulfilling experience if it weren’t for your trust and generosity.