



BOSNIANS AND OTHER REFUGEES FROM THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Overview:

Many immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia, now reside in Iowa. Many of them came in the mid-1990s as war refugees, and were granted legal permission by the United States government to resettle throughout the country. Many of the Bosnians here in Iowa are actually “secondary migrants,” as they first resettled in other areas like Utica, New York, before eventually moving to Iowa. Most are drawn to the state by jobs in the meatpacking and agricultural processing industries, and by Iowa’s peaceful, rural, family-oriented lifestyle.

Health providers should understand that Bosnians, unlike many other immigrants to Iowa, and generally classified legally as true refugees. This means that they were forced to flee their homeland due to ethnic conflict, and did not come voluntarily to the United States like economic migrants. Many would prefer to be back in Bosnia if the political situation was different, and they generally resent people who think they came to America looking for work.

Bosnia is quite well developed and cosmopolitan. These newcomers will resent providers that speak down to them and imply that the Bosnians came from a “backward” country.

Language and Religion:

Bosnia was one of the six republics that made up the former Yugoslavia, and was the most ethnically diverse. Most of the Bosnians in Iowa speak Bosnian, which is similar to Serbo-Croatian.

Most Bosnians in Iowa are Muslim. Although they are Muslim, most are fairly secular in their practices. Providers should be familiar with Muslim practices, though. However, they should not assume, for instance, that Bosnian women wear veils and long dresses. Most Bosnians do not eat pork, celebrate Christmas, or attend churches.

Family and Social Structure:

Bosnians place a great deal of value on extended family ties. Many have now been successful in bringing additional family members over to the United States, like grandparents. Grown children are usually excellent caretakers of their elderly parents, and do not like to put them into nursing homes. Likewise, young children will usually give great respect to their elders. Public health programming should target the entire family unit, rather than just the individual.

Most Bosnians are very well educated and highly literate. Not all will know English, though, upon arrival in the United States, and will still prefer educational programs in their native language.

Many Bosnians were professionals back in their home country. In fact, most were doctors, nurses, teachers, and business leaders. They will greatly resent being spoken down to by American health workers. Many would like to resume their professions in the United States, particularly as medical providers, and should be utilized in refugee programming.

Communication Style:

Most Bosnians value a warm, open, direct, and respectful form of communication with others. Bosnians are also well known for their sense of humor and positive outlook on life.

Barriers to Care and Common Health Conditions:

Because they are classified as refugees, most Bosnians qualify for a number of special federal and state benefits in the health, business, and human service sectors. They are generally legal residents in Iowa. While they may financially be able to access health care here, not all health organizations have Bosnian translators available or personnel trained in how to work with refugee populations.

Because they are true war refugees, many Bosnians have experienced extremely difficult circumstances prior to arrival in the United States. Many lost their homes and livelihoods, and most have close family members and friends that died in the war. Some were deeply traumatized by ethnic cleansing, war injuries, torture, group rape, and other human rights abuses.

Significant mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress are common human reactions to uncommon circumstances. Health providers should expect to see higher rates of these conditions in Bosnian refugees than in the general population of immigrants. However, mental health conditions often carry a negative stigma with them in Bosnian culture, and so many are reluctant to discuss them with providers. Mental health providers should be trained in the complexities of dealing with war refugees. Clinicians should not push a trauma victim to share feelings or experiences, until he or she is ready. Providers can only provide gentle, ample, and supportive opportunities for them to do so.

Bosnians generally have high rates of smoking and drinking alcohol, as they are integral cultural practices. Like their Russian immigrant counterparts, they may not be familiar with American laws prohibiting the purchase of alcohol by children for their parents, and they may have some difficulty getting used to the anti-smoking mentality in the United States. Second-hand smoke and prenatal smoking are often issues that need public health intervention as well.

Bereavement:

Large numbers of extended family members and friends will likely come to visit the seriously ill or deceased patient. They will often gather to offer special prayers of compassion and forgiveness for the deceased.

Bosnians typically will prefer to be buried in special cemeteries set aside for Muslims.

Most Bosnians, who are Muslims, believe that life on earth is to be spent preparing for another world after death.

In general, Bosnians do not embalm. The body is usually washed and purified in a ritual manner, and then covered in a simple cloth. The deceased is then buried in the ground directly, upon completion of the funeral. The burial usually takes place fairly quickly after death. Direct burial in the ground is required by “shari’ah,” or Islamic law.

Traditional Health Practices:

Herbal infusions, alcohol-based tinctures, and other forms of traditional medicine were commonly used in Bosnia for generations, and are still found to some extent in Bosnian ethnic markets here in Iowa. Many Bosnians will use these remedies simultaneously with Western medicine.