



Northside Bosnian refugee center closing

BY ERIN ZALESKI
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Murisa Cirkic still has nightmares.

Although more than a decade has passed since the Dayton Accords put an end to the bloody conflict in the Balkans, the 35-year-old Rogers Park resident and Bosnian refugee occasionally suffers flashbacks from those horrific days.

"The doctor said that it is normal and very common," said Cirkic who fled her native Bosnian city of Prijedor in 1993. She said she has been diagnosed with PTSD or, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. "When you are just thinking about staying alive, you don't think about anything else. The bad memories come later."

She is not alone. Many of the thousands of Bosnians who have sought the services at the Bosnian Herzegovinian American Community Center at 6219 N. Sheridan Rd. on the city's North Side suffer from similar trauma. Cirkic works as an outreach and interpretation coordinator there.

The only organization of its kind in Chicago, the center has provided the community with everything from youth and senior programs to translation services, to assistance locating the remains of relatives lost in the war. It also serves as a haven for a scarred community to share their experiences and come to terms with what happened.

"This is the period we are facing now--the mental fallout," said Cirkic.

"The need in the community is still there."

Regardless of whether the need still exists, after nine years of serving the city's Bosnian refugees, the center is set to close its doors later this month. Following the denial of a federal grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement last fall, the staff recently learned that the state would not make up for the \$202,000 difference.

"That was 75 percent of our budget," said John Psiharis the center's former executive director, who was laid off because there wasn't enough money to pay his salary. "I don't know why the state money didn't come through--I thought it would have."

Calls to the offices of State Rep. Harry Osterman and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, whose districts include the North Side, were not returned.

Psiharis said that the center moved from its previous location on Devon Avenue to the smaller, North Lakeside Cultural Center earlier this year. It also made significant budget cuts in an effort to stay open, including downsizing staff.

"The staff has been working for the past month without pay," said Psiharis whose last day was June 30.

In the meantime, Psiharis said the center had been hoping that another agency might be open to a merger, but so far nothing had come through.

"You never say never," he said. "We are hoping that someone will recognize that people need help."

The center's most vulnerable clients, Psiharis said, are its seniors.

"The older you are, the harder it is to adapt," he said. "They have lost loved ones in the war, they don't speak the language, the country is unfamiliar and they can't work," he added.

The center had helped them navigate the inevitable road bumps that come with such a huge adjustment, he said, whether helping them apply for benefits, learn English or figure out the bus system.

"We are a bridge between this new country and our homeland," said Azra Heljo, the center's associate director. "Many clients are coming and saying, 'what should I do?' They are scared that nobody will help them."

One state agency said that it isn't unusual for federal funds to eventually dry up once refugees have been resettled into an area.

"Refugee resettlement comes in cycles and the largest number of new Bosnian refugees came between 1994 and 1999," said Ed Silverman, the chief of the Illinois Bureau of Immigrant and Refugee Services. "The largest number of new refugees since 2000 has come from Africa, and they are a priority when it comes to federal money. There are no longer large numbers of unemployed Bosnian refugees--the Bosnian center is no longer a priority."

Silverman added that the center's inability to diversify its funding is what ultimately led to its forthcoming closure.

"The challenge that small, community-based organizations face is having sufficient funds for a director, a development person and its office overhead," explained Silverman, who said he was unaware of any state funding efforts.

"The center went without a director for about a year and lost any fiscal momentum they had and were never able to recover."

Cirkic said that the Bosnian community of 35,000 would support the center if it had the resources.

"We are a very young community," said Cirkic, who said many clients send money back to Bosnia to support family and to fund the prosecution of war criminals. "It is just not possible (to financially sustain the center) for people just starting out."

Although other state agencies may be able to absorb some of the center's clients, Psiharis said that there is a disconnect when it comes to understanding the needs of the community.

"The staffs do not speak Bosnian, and there are cultural issues that they do not understand," he said. "Our staff is made up of Bosnian refugees, and they heal through helping others heal. You will not find another agency doing that."

"I think some people have forgotten (about Bosnia), and I think our government has forgotten," he added.

Chicago's thousands of Bosnians who lived through the war haven't forgotten.

After being ordered from her home at gunpoint by a childhood friend, Cirkic began the grueling journey to the Bosnian-controlled safe area of the country and then on to Croatia. On the way, Serbian militants stopped the bus and separated those who would go on from those who would be executed.

"The rest of us continued walking through the mountains toward the border," said Cirikic. "And then they began shelling us. It is a miracle that I am still alive."

It is the presence of such memories, said employees, which make it imperative that the center remain open.

"There are still people missing--the wounds are still fresh," said Heljo whose husband never located the remains of his family. "You cannot understand if you are not Bosnian. That is what makes us so unique and so important. Some people just need people to listen."

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