Harnessing Science to Help Refugees

An estimated 65 million people around the world have been displaced in the wake of violence and conflict, driven from their homes and in many cases their countries. What role can scientists, engineers, and health professionals play in supporting refugees' well-being and human rights? And how can they help their colleagues who have been displaced? In December the National Academies' Committee on Human Rights held a symposium to explore these questions.

In his keynote address, former United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees Alexander Aleinikoff explained that one of the biggest challenges is the protracted nature of many refugee crises. People are often displaced for decades, able neither to return home nor to fully participate in life in their new location. Some of the panel discussions that followed delved into how technology can help respond to challenges linked to displacement, including helping refugees more fully participate in their new countries. An organization called PeaceGeeks, for example, is developing an app for newcomers arriving in Canada to help them identify the services they need — such as support in finding employment or a school for their children, or for learning English — and develop a personalized

road map to connect them with those services.

The symposium highlighted another key way in which scientists, engineers, and health professionals can respond to refugee crises: through research, which in some cases has already helped to guide decisions by governments and humanitarian organizations. "Data can be a powerful tool when designing interventions and formulating policy, particularly given resource limitations and competing priorities," said Martin Chalfie, chair of the Committee on Human Rights, who echoed other speakers in pointing to the need for more rigorous evidence-gathering and analysis. Evidence-based approaches to displacement should go hand in hand in hand with policies and interventions that acknowledge and respect human rights, he stressed.

Presentations also looked at other ways for scientists, engineers, and health professionals to help their displaced colleagues, for example by supporting the efforts of Scholars at Risk, the Scholar Rescue Fund, and other organizations dedicated to helping displaced scholars find safe places to continue their work. In addition, the symposium featured a screening of "Science in Exile," a documentary that explores how recent conflict in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq has threatened the lives and livelihoods of researchers, forcing them to suspend their work and flee their homelands. A trailer and information on the film can be found on the website of the World Academy of Sciences at <twas.org/article/journey-refugee-scientists>. — *Sara Frueh*

More information on the symposium and an archived webcast of presentations can be found at <www7.nationalacademies.org/humanrights/>.