

Bike repair training helps Erie refugees

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Refugees, the fastest-growing population in the city of Erie, often struggle with transportation when they first arrive here.

Think about it.

You move to a new country with only the clothes in your luggage, a language barrier to overcome and a host of other challenges. You have no driver's license, let alone a vehicle,

but you have a life — one that entails a job, grocery shopping, medical appointments, family recreation and more.

Many refugees in Erie use

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bicycles as their main transportation.

A local program, marking its second anniversary this month, is helping these men, women and children by teaching them how to repair bicycles, and in many cases giving them donated bikes to keep after they've completed workshops where they learn the basics of repair, safety and riding.

The Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network Bicycle Co-Op, created in August 2014

and operated out of the basement in the former St. John the Baptist School, 509 E. 26th St., has repaired nearly 70 bicycles through more than 600 hours of volunteer service.

The program has about 200 donated bicycles in storage and a dozen volunteers spending time in one-on-one fix-it sessions with refugees.

"After you complete the workshops and get a bicycle, you are really willing and interested to learn how to repair it if it breaks down," said Margarita Dangel, site director of the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network eastside office.

The co-op is primarily used by refugees, but is also open to children and adults living in the network's eastside territory, which spans from East 16th to East 26th streets, from State Street to East Avenue.

"There are no bicycle repair shops in that area. None," Dangel said. "What we provide is invaluable."

Those interested in donating bicycles or bike locks, or wanting to volunteer to the initiative, can call 870-9020.

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Margarita Dangel, site director at the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network eastside office, and volunteer Gerry Custer look over donated bicycles Aug. 25 at the SSSJNN Bike Co-Op. JACK HANRAHAN/ERIE TIMES-NEWS