

Q&A with Jefferson Dononcourt

Jefferson Dononcourt is an Employment Specialist for the I-RISE Trenton office. He received his Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Engineering from the Université d'État d'Haïti and is currently enrolled in the Environment and Public Health program at Rutgers University, with a focus on sustainable development and environmental protection.

What did you do prior to working at I-RISE – what's your background?

I am the co-founder of an Agribusiness in Haiti. I supported local farmers, addressing the issue of food insecurity, aligning with United Nations sustainability goals. Prior to my arrival to the U.S., I did an internship at the Centre for International Studies & Cooperation, working on a soil fertility project. Once in the States, I worked as an ESL coordinator, helping Haitians to adjust to life in the U.S.

How did you get your start at I-RISE?

I was not planning to come to the U.S. Things were going pretty well until the gang activity made it unsafe to stay in Haiti. I arrived in December, 2023 under the Haitian Humanitarian Parole Program, so I was originally an I-RISE client. I started my job with I-RISE in November, 2024.

How does your immigration journey inform and affect your interactions with your Haitian clients?

Every day, clients reach out to me asking for advice about what's currently happening with immigration. Even though I'm in the same situation as they are, I always do my best to provide clear guidance and to offer encouragement. Most clients don't know that I'm also navigating the same challenges, but I use my professional experience to connect with them on a deeper level - that I understand their fears, confusion and hopes because I live them, too. That allows me to serve them, not only professionally, but also



with empathy and sincerity. As many I-RISE employees know, clients place a lot of trust and faith in us, and I believe it is our responsibility to honor that trust by staying informed, showing compassion and providing the best support we can.

What challenges do your Haitian clients have, both in general and specifically with finding employment?

The biggest challenge, in general, is finding jobs. Other challenges are language barriers, lack of skills, and also transportation. Many of my clients have trouble with English, which makes it difficult for them to pass interviews, even after I have helped



them craft a resume, and submitted an application on their behalf. That's why I organized a recent mock interview event.

Then there's a lack of professional or educational background. Sometimes, when I try to create a resume for a client, I don't know what to include because they have had little or no schooling, or very limited work experience. In this case, it's really hard to match them with job openings that require specific skills or qualifications.

Also, many employers require that employees have reliable transportation, which includes clients who don't have a car or access to dependable public transit. This limits their opportunities, even though they are willing and able to work.

What do you like best about this job? Can you think of a success story with a client (or several clients) that made you want to share and celebrate?

One thing that I like about this job is that I get to help people. Helping others is something that I truly enjoy. It's really meaningful to do a job where I'm making a difference in someone's life. I appreciate my team, both the employment team and the larger I-RISE staff. They feel like a family. We support one another and are always ready to help each other. That creates a positive and collaborative work environment."

One client was having problems finding a job because of the language barrier and lack of transportation. Fortunately, she got enrolled in the HHA (Home Health Aide) program and got her license. Three months ago, she called me and said that she started a job through an agency, and she helped me find positions there for other clients. I really like when I find a job for a client, and they help me find jobs for other clients.

What are your concerns, under the current political climate in the US, for your clients?

As you know, our clients need to have their work permits. Since the new Administration, every day the messages are negative, they are never positive, so this will affect the reissuing of work permits for our clients. I have some clients that I've created a vision for them, but I'm not able to submit an application for them because their work permits expired. Many employers won't take the risk if a client's work permit expires in a month or two.

What are your hopes and dreams for I-RISE Employment Services? What are your hopes and dreams for the people of Haiti?

My hopes are that we can find jobs for as many clients as possible and they can then help us find jobs for more I-RISE clients.

My hope for the people of Haiti is that everyone can go to school. If the gang violence would stop, it would be easier to go about our activities. If I want to go back to visit, I would be able to do that. I speak almost every day with my brother, sisters and cousins who are still in Haiti. [parents are no longer living]

Editor's Note: As of May 2025, U.S. commercial flights to Haiti remain suspended due to security concerns as a result of gang violence.

Anything else you'd like our readers to know?

Lack of skills is a major barrier to employment for our clients, so if we had some funding available, for example, if we could give clients a scholarship for certificate programs or community college, that would be helpful. Some clients can pay maybe 50%, but others cannot. I think if we can help them to find funding for training, then we can help them find jobs more easily.

If you would like to get involved with our Trenton employment team as a volunteer, or if you have information to share about either a job lead or funding support, please reach out to jefferson@interfaithrise.org