

uVoice 2022 White Paper

Health Disparities Impacting Immigrant and Refugee Youth and Families in Central Iowa

Introduction

uVoice, a youth philanthropy board facilitated by Community Youth Concepts and funded by the Mid Iowa Health Foundation and the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines, consists of a group of fifteen students who live in the Des Moines metro area. These students come together twice a month to identify issues facing youth in their community and to combat these identified issues through a grant-making process. uVoice members research community needs, develop a grant application, review responses to their request for proposals, and allocate grant funds to non-profit organizations addressing the health-oriented issues prioritized by uVoice.

Background

Throughout our topic selection process, the experiences of immigrant and refugees in America, specifically the injustices and discrimination within the immigration system, resonated with many members of the board. Our board members completed research, participated in lengthy discussion, and debated the relevance of the issue in our schools, workplaces, and healthcare systems. Based on our research, the board sought out members of the community with experience or expertise in areas that our grant prioritized: housing, education, healthcare, legal aid. These community members were a part of our Community Needs Assessment, and allowed our board to learn more about the issues facing immigrants and refugees in Central Iowa.

Community Needs Findings

This year, our community needs assessment took place in the form of a virtual panel with experts from the community. The uVoice members asked questions and discussed immigrant and refugee issues with five experts: Nola Aigner Davis, a communications officer at the Polk County Health Department; Stephanie Morris, director of the Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa (RACI); Emily Rebelskey, staff at Iowa Migrant Movement for Justice; Dr. Yogesh Shah with Broadlawns Medical Center; and Dr. Fairouz Bishara, principal of Waukee Northwest High School. These panelists shared multiple perspectives and focuses of immigration/refugee youth as well as families. Some main takeaways from the community needs assessment included:

- Many immigrant and refugee families need translation/interpretation services to interact within their community. However, the lack of these services can lead to misinformation in important scenarios, such as doctor visits or in schools. Furthermore, immigrant children or those born to immigrants are often the ones taking the burden of translating for their parents.
- There is a lack of equity in schools for immigrant and refugee youth; schools need more mechanisms in place to include and provide resources for students as they adjust to their new climate.
- In the healthcare system, many immigrants and refugees are not aware of the severity of various medical issues, often waiting to seek medical attention until it's an emergency.

Negative mental and sexual health issues are especially common in immigration and refugees as well.

- Affordable housing is a substantial barrier for new immigrants and refugees as they begin their lives in central Iowa. Landlords often refuse to rent to new immigrant and refugee families because they don't have any employment or income history.
- Legal aid within the immigration process (and the complexity of it) is found to disregard a lot of the immigrants' essential needs. It is costly on time, in many areas it often took years for one to be granted citizenship. This is challenging to immigrants and refugees because they sought out help in a system they did not fully understand.

Discussion

Among the many barriers immigrant and refugee youth face during their transition, navigating the healthcare system is one of the most daunting. Many immigrant and refugee youth come to Iowa without having adequate healthcare, causing malnourishment, untreated conditions, and many other issues that the average child in Iowa doesn't face. The complexity of the healthcare system intersects with the complexity of the legal system as well, meaning that many immigrant families do not understand their legal, green card, or social security status. As a result, many families do not know what they're entitled to in terms of healthcare. Emily Rebelskey exemplified this in the Community Needs Assessment, saying that some immigrants may qualify for Medicare if they are over 65 or Medicaid if they have a disability or live under the poverty line. Understanding and navigating the American healthcare system has proven a substantial barrier to immigrant and refugee youth health in central Iowa.

This complexity comes through in language barriers as well. Without adequate translation and interpretation services, it becomes difficult for families to communicate with their physicians and understand their situation. Many times, the children end up translating for their parents in situations like these, creating an uncomfortable power dynamic and a level of responsibility that is unfair and stressful to the child.

Often immigrant/refugee youth and families do not have an established family practice doctor either. Dr. Bishara had one student at Northwest High School who had never seen a doctor before. This means there are more situations in which these youth do not get treatment and basic care until it is an emergency. This lack of basic care also means that immigrant youth often need different types of care than doctors usually provide. The need for extra treatment exacerbates the lack of access to essential care for these families.

With all of the social, logistical, emotional, and cultural aspects of transitioning to a new country, the panelists in the Community Needs Assessment all agreed that immigrant and refugee youth are at a higher risk of substance use and mental health issues. Sadly, suicidal ideation is common among this group. There is stigma surrounding mental health in the US and many other cultures where immigrant and refugee youth grow up, making access to treatment increasingly difficult. According to Emily Rebelsky, insurance doesn't cover mental health interpreters. This makes it extremely difficult for youth with language barriers to get counseling when they need it. The gaps in accommodation and resources for immigrant and refugee families are wide everywhere, but they are especially impactful when it comes to healthcare.

Activities and extracurricular are core parts of any student's schooling career. These simple activities become much more difficult, especially for students and families trying to navigate a new country. In the typical American childhood, one may notice the amount of extracurricular and school activities are mentioned. Those activities help all students create a sense of identity. Activities like this are a fundamental need for every student, not just immigrants and refugees.

When we met with Dr. Bashra, she shared a lot of valuable information about how many immigrants and refugees feel about adjusting to the school systems and some issues she feels are unjustly impacting these groups. It is important to make a community outside of the one you make with your family, when transportation is an issue it becomes nearly impossible for many immigrants and refugees. Dr. Bashra shared her own personal experience alongside her daughter's experience. The issue could also stem from the place of the unknown. Many immigrants and refugees simply may not know where to go to meet like minded people.

Another thing that was brought to the attention of uVoice, is the idea of navigating two completely different systems, especially while you are so young. Everyday many immigrant and refugee kids wake up in one culture and go to school in another. Many of these students do not have the time to learn this whole new culture and are often left out of activities simply because they do not know how. When the access to school activities or even cultural activities increases students learn to make communities in other places.

During our community needs assessment another thing that was mentioned by Dr. Bashra was the need and importance of having more social workers. For example, she shared the challenges she faced while taking ethnic foods, and the discrepancies between her experiences. She was able to share that in the Waukee School District there is only one social worker shared across, two high schools, two junior high schools, 2 middle schools and almost 10 elementary schools. This equates to a 1 to over 11,500 ratio of social workers to students. These social workers provide a vital bridge from one's home life to their school life.

When immigrant and refugee children do not get that sense of "normalcy" it can leave an almost dangerous impact on their lives. Having the ability to meet with a vast variety of groups can do nothing but increase the sense of home-like feeling wherever these students are. Making sure that ALL students feel valued, safe, and secure in their relationships is important for many livelihoods. It could be the thing that makes or breaks their willingness to succeed and improve.

Immigration and Refugee Resource Infrastructure

One of the topics that continued to rise to the surface throughout our Community Needs Assessment discussion with each panelist was the impact of underfunded and underdeveloped infrastructure resources on the health and quality of life of immigrant and refugee families. The most widespread concerns that each panelist voiced involved translation and interpretation services in all aspects of an immigrant or refugee's life: healthcare, education, law, and everyday interactions. The lack of well-trained interpreters in these areas severely affects the resources that immigrants and refugees are able to access.

Another systemic issue that is impacting the safety and wellbeing of immigrants and refugees is the backup in the court system. Emily Rebelskey informed us that Immigration courts have been closed since COVID first hit in 2020, and the backup of cases has barred thousands from receiving a green card and in turn, the opportunity to get a job, buy a house, or

be considered a citizen. In addition to this backup, many immigrant advocates and nonprofits are protesting Iowa's English-Only law. The law allows all state documents -- from driving tests to legal applications -- to be written and administered solely in English. This law adds another roadblock to any legal process immigrants and refugees will encounter, and furthers the need for trained interpreters to aid in the legal process.

When it comes to housing, resources are scarce and typically short-lived. Refugee and immigrant resettlement programs only last around three months, when they used to last nine. Because of a shortage of resources and funds, many resettlement and housing programs have had to shorten their period of assistance, potentially creating more harm than good. In addition to the increasingly short assistance period, many immigrants and refugees enter the country in debt, which is still expected to be repaid even as they attempt to find housing and feed their families. We are not providing nearly enough resources to those who need it most, and the most critical time is the first six months in the US. Many of our panelists advocated for systemic change in many of the infrastructures our country has established: immigrant and refugee housing, legal aid, and translation services across the board to better equip immigrants and refugees with the resources and support to flourish in this new country.

Projects Funded

This year uVoice chose three organizations: Camp Fire Heart of Iowa, Child Future International, and Urbandale Community Action Network. Each of these organizations have a unique ability to help serve immigrants and refugees of the greater Des Moines area! Throughout the year we highlighted a few specific priorities we wanted to see from each of the organizations!

1. Increase accessibility to extracurriculars either in or out of school for immigrant and/or refugee youth.
2. Create resources for immigrant and/or refugee students in schools (examples include but are not limited to: providing resources to families joining a school, improving the climate of the school to create a more inclusive environment, providing school resources in different languages, etc.)
3. Provide accessible mental health care resources for immigrant and/or refugee youth and families.
4. Support the development of translation and/or interpretation services for students and their families in school as well as healthcare environments.
5. Provide housing resources for immigrant and/or refugee youth and families.
6. Provide access to legal aid resources for immigrant families to ease the transition to citizenship in Central Iowa and reduce confusion about the immigration process.
7. Provide health care resources specifically for immigrant and refugee youth and their families and/or provide support to make available resources more accessible.

As a board we wanted to make sure that we had a wide array of options and understood that there may be limited organizations that focus on the betterment of refugees and immigrants. To our surprise 13 different organizations applied for our grant! Those 13 set the new record for most grant applications reviewed, beating last year's 8. The choice was difficult, but we are confident in the three organizations selected!

- Campfire Heart of Iowa (2000)
 - Campfire Heart of Iowa mission statement immediately discusses the hardships of being a child in this day and age - especially if your parents are immigrants and/or refugees in a country. Campfire Heart of Iowa created the traditional American summer camp experience for children of refugees and immigrants.
 - After a 2 year hiatus, Campfire Heart of Iowa will be back for its 5 year with help from the uVoice 200 donation!
 - Their summer camp helps achieve the first grant priority: Increase accessibility to extracurriculars either in or out of school for immigrant and/or refugee youth.
- Child Future International (2000)
 - Child Future International's mission lies in healing and strengthening immigrant families in Polk County on a small scale and the United States at a large scale. They hope to do this by providing services to communities that will empower individuals and lead them to a brighter future.
 - The project that we are helping fund is one that will enrich the lives of youth immigrants by providing them engaging and enriching content that will challenge youth in the areas of STEM and encourage them to think outside of their usual comfort zone. They hope the eventual outcomes of their project will increase academic youth exposure to reading and STEM education, will better prepare them for job interviews, prepare their resume, and improve their job performance, as well as help them develop an interest in volunteering and community service projects.
- Urbandale Community Action Network (1000)
 - Urbandale Community Action Network (UCAN) is an organization that, as a whole, works to improve the quality of life for those residing in Urbandale.
 - The project that we chose to contribute towards is one that specifically focuses on immigrants and refugees. While they've worked with and supported immigrant families in the past, they are opening a new office that will be specific to providing support for youth. Additionally, they will be providing after-school programs for 4th grade, 5th grade, and middle school immigrant and refugee youth.
 - Their project addresses our grant priorities 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7!

Recommendations

Empathy

People tend to disregard the struggles immigrants/refugees and their families have to face when moving to the United States. Immigrants lack the help and resources already, but find it especially difficult when others fail to understand the problems they are faced with on a day to day basis when trying to become a citizen and create a solid home for their families. Thus, this lack of empathy in those areas creates more of a challenge to provide resources for immigrants because people don't fully understand how difficult the steps are in attempting to become citizens and provide for their families. This takes part in why many immigrants feel alone throughout their process in settling. This absence of empathy towards immigrants' positions recognizes a barrier that stands in the way of getting proper resources that can actually push them and their families towards success and overcoming each of their specific challenges they

are facing. Whether that barrier stands in the way of getting proper assistance at school, work, or even the legal system, simply taking the time to understand and hear the voice of an immigrant/refugee who may be struggling can help them feel safer moving to a country they're not familiar with. Understanding why they may be struggling can help with generating strong emotional support for immigrants and their families so that they can take the next step. For example; children of immigrants may receive better assistance at school and feel more comfortable if they had trusted adults who understood what they faced at home. A better understanding of what an immigrant/refugee has to overcome could result in more specified help they could receive because many times they turn to general resources that may not target their specific problem.

Inclusivity:

A significant point that underlies many issues regarding immigrant/refugee circumstances is the lack of priority for inclusivity, whether it be in educational settings, healthcare, worklife, or society as a whole. The United States is often known as the land of opportunities, attracting people from cultures worldwide; however, the unmistakable diversity in its population is not always met with comfortability and welcome accommodations. Whether it be the lack of services targeted toward immigrants/refugees or the preconceived notions of those of different backgrounds, setting up an environment that above all values inclusivity is rare to see. Oftentimes, the technical aspects of immigrant/refugee work overlook the importance to focus on more emotional means of connection—the connection that immigrants/refugees need to feel a part of a greater, inclusive community. The first step in building safe environments is to identify the cultural barriers one may face in their everyday life, especially by gathering this information directly from immigrants/refugees. These difficulties, languages or social norms for example, are usually common among various cultures. With the idea of combating barriers as the central concern, it allows greater room for additional creative approaches because there has been a primary effort in creating comfortability. On top of tackling these obstacles, there also should be a greater effort in embracing the diversity of a community. Although the United States is a country of immigrants, there is still a significant problem in not just respecting its wonderful diversity, but even just acknowledging its existence. If people have yet to grasp the full understanding of what immigrants/refugees endure, there is a disconnect in awareness and overall compassion, leading to possibly negative consequences—for the goal is that people become more inclusive, not more divisive. Simply prioritizing taking initiative to embrace various cultures can make all the difference in presenting an all-inclusive setting of diverse peoples.

Language Barrier:

Many people tend to forget the difficulties that come with moving to a country where they have either never been, or are not used to living in. One of the biggest challenges facing immigrants and refugees that move to the United States is the language barrier they face. While there are a myriad of other challenges they may face, having a language barrier stands in the way of many of the ways they seek to achieve inclusion and belonging. For many immigrants and refugees there are few, if any, people that possess the skills necessary to translate for them whether because their language is spoken less commonly or because people that do speak their language are unaware the need for their help exists. Additionally, because translation services

are often extremely expensive, impoverished or low-income immigrants and refugees can find the service inaccessible. Whether making decisions about where to live, going to a physician, deciding on a school for their children to attend, or any number of other scenarios, being unable to communicate stands in the way of many immigrants and refugees trying to find their footing in a new country. In order to combat this, many families are forced to resort to using their children as translators. First, this can be a struggle for children who are trying to adjust themselves, and second, it can sometimes lead to miscommunication due to the fact that either there is no equivalent to certain terms in the immigrant or refugees native language or because the child themselves aren't sure of how to accurately translate phrases in English. In order to lessen this challenge, there are a few things that can be done by others. One, if you possess translational skills, offering your services to families that need them can be invaluable. There are many languages for which translation services are difficult to find, but even for languages that are more accessible, there is still a shortage of accessible translation services. Two, if you are unable to provide translational services, providing donations to organizations that can provide services can be another way to help refugees and immigrants take the first step in their journey towards life in the United States.