



SERVICES TO OLDER ADULT REFUGEES:

Successes, lessons learned
and recommended best practices

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The Services to Older Adult Refugees Grant, funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, provided the Denver Regional Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging an opportunity to expand the reach of its services to elders from refugee communities. The project was in collaboration with the Colorado Refugee Services Program, the Colorado African Organization and several community organizations including the Aurora Center for Active Adults.



PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

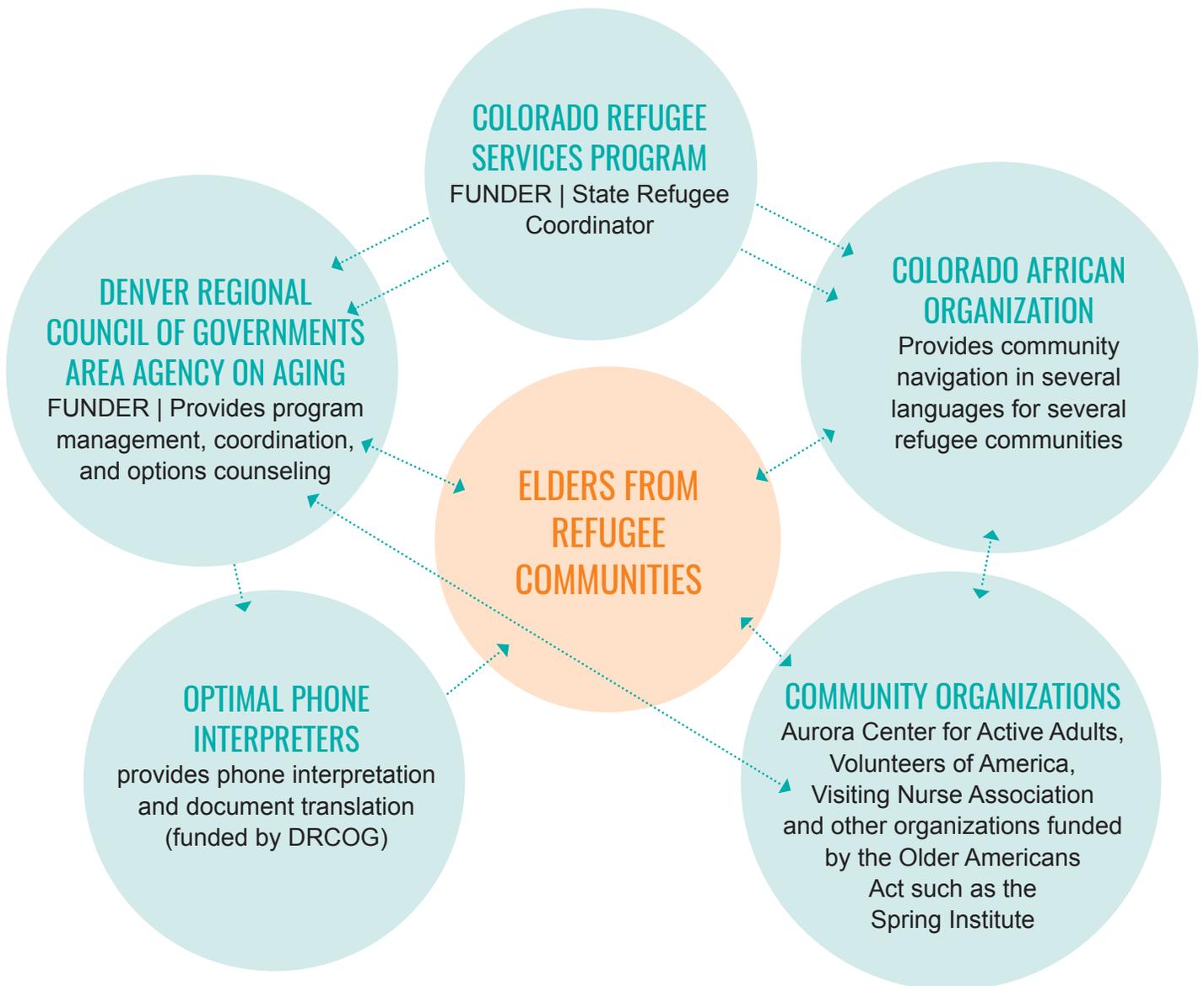
The purpose of this document is twofold:

1. to share successes and lessons learned from the three-year Services to Older Refugees grant
2. to share best practices with other agencies working with older adults from refugee communities

SUCCESSSES

Structure

The program had a communication structure for which its design and implementation included community navigators and elders from refugee populations.



Community Navigators

Community navigators from Colorado African Organization helped elders in their communities connect to mainstream services. The community navigators who worked on the project represented Denver's various refugee populations. As members of these communities who also spoke English and worked closely with the program coordinator, the community navigators' role was invaluable for building trust, serving as cultural and linguistic interpreters, educating those new to working with people with refugee status about the process and experience, training mainstream organizations on reaching out to refugee communities, teaching classes, and providing insight into program design and activities.

COLORADO AFRICAN ORGANIZATION COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS



Great Lakes Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda)

Languages: French, Kicongo, Kirundi, Swahili

Navigators: Nasibu Nzigiymana (2013 to June 2015);
Georgette Kapuku Mabi (2014 to present)



Eritrea and Ethiopia

Languages: Kunama, Tigrinya, Amharic

Navigator: **Lydia Dumam** (co-manager of community navigation, 2013 to present)



Somalia

Languages: Somalia

Navigators: Nadhifo Yusuf (2013 to Aug 2015);
Fardus Ahmed (August 2015 to present)



Iraq (and other countries)

Languages: Arabic, French, Spanish

Navigators: **Nadira Rami** (from Morocco), Dorghum Al Khabi



Myanmar (Burma)

Languages: Karen, Burmese

Navigators: **Ka Paw Htoo**

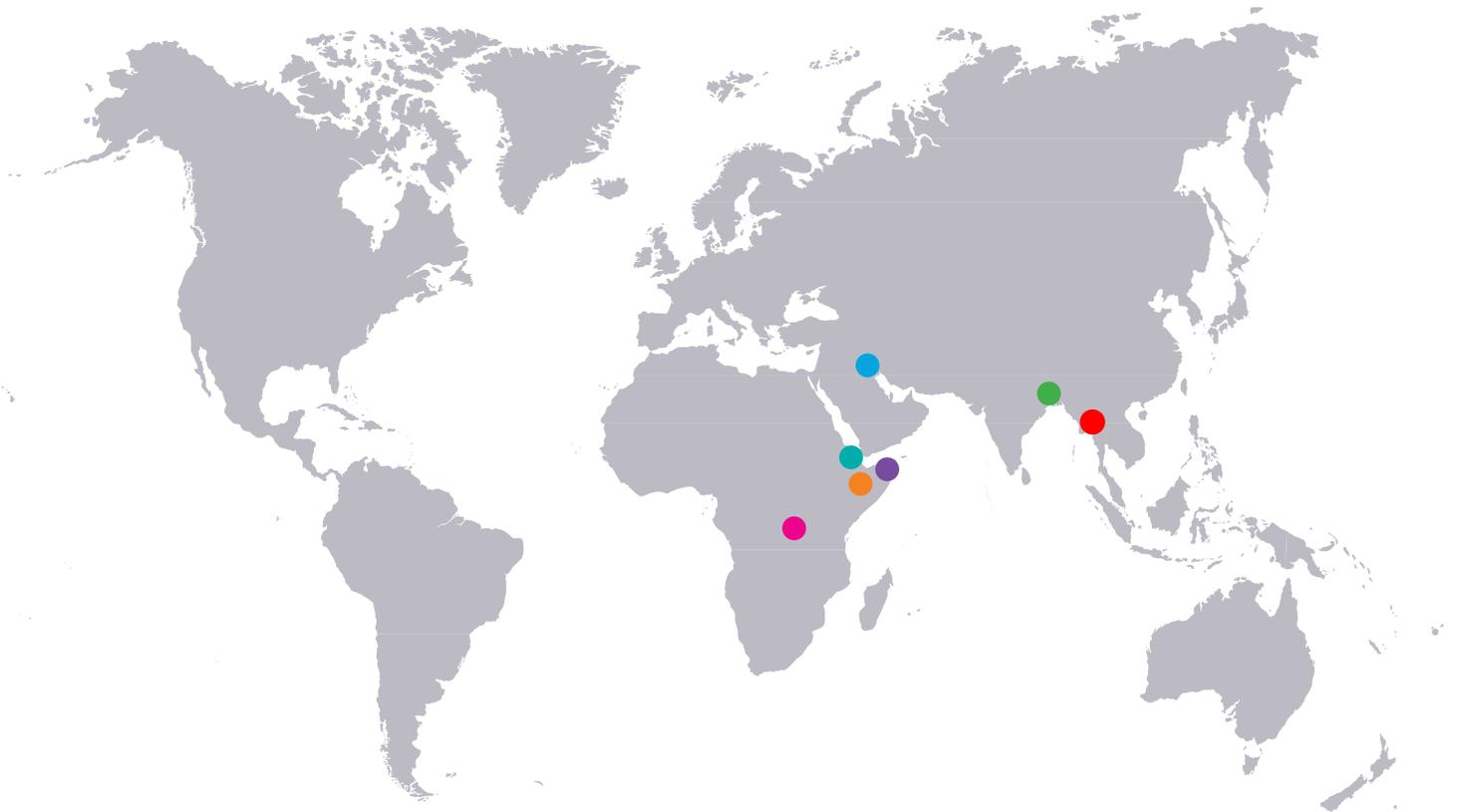


Bhutan and Nepal

Languages: Nepali, Hindi, Zhongka

Navigators: Bhuwan Pyakurel (2013 to 2014);

Asbi Mizer (co-manager of community navigation, 2014 to present)



- **Great Lakes Africa** (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda)
- **Eritrea**
- **Ethiopia**
- **Somalia**
- **Iraq**
- **Myanmar (Burma)**
- **Bhutan and Nepal**

The Aurora Center for Active Adults

The Aurora Center for Active Adults is a community center for older adults located in a diverse area east of Denver and close to several refugee communities. The center includes weight and exercise rooms, a billiards room, classrooms, craft areas and community space. For the Services to Older Refugee grant, the center provided exercise programs and classes, teachers, time, community space and volunteers to extend services to elders from refugee communities.



Throughout the grant, 69 refugee elders were served at the Aurora Center for Active Adults. In September 2015, 18 of the 31 participants who used the center did so on days when neither a community navigator nor coordinator was available, meaning about 58 percent were able to use the center independently. Participants reported a decrease in their sense of social isolation and an increase in physical strength.



Participant Feedback in 2014 and 2015

Coordinators and community navigators sought informal feedback and frequently conducted focus groups.

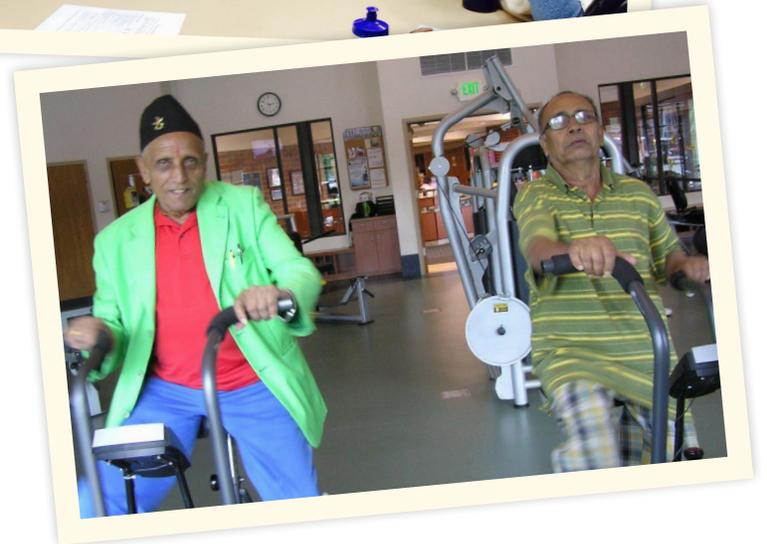
In 2014, coordinators and community navigators surveyed 25 participants in Aurora Center for Active Adults refugee programs from Burma, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Bhutan.

100 percent stated that they somewhat or strongly agreed with the following statements:



“Because I go to the Aurora Center for Active Adults, I...

- take better care of my health.”
- have reduced stress and feel less lonely.”
- feel happier and more satisfied with my life.”
- have something to look forward to each day.”
- would recommend the Services to Older Refugees Program to a friend or family member.”



Verbatim comments:

- “When I started exercises in Aurora Center for Active Adults, I became more comfortable. Before that, I had some problem. We are happy having your support. Keep it up!”
- “I had muscle problem before now. When I started exercise I became comfortable.”
- “I’m so thankful to Aurora Center for Active Adults for providing the best thing in my life.”
- “I had pain in my legs and arms but after I started doing exercise, I feel much better. It also has helped me lose some weight.”

In 2015, 18 participants in Aurora Center for Active Adults refugee programs were surveyed from Burma, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Bhutan. 100 percent stated that they somewhat or strongly agreed that:

“Because I go to the Services for Older Adult Refugee Program I...

- see friends more often.”
- make new friends.”
- take better care of my health.”
- have reduced stress and feel less lonely.”
- feel more able to stay independent.”
- am more physically active.”
- would recommend the Services to Older Refugees Program to a friend or family member.”

Verbatim comments:

- “It makes me to stay active and I love it while I and my husband go together.”
- “I feel more strong whenever I come to Aurora Center for Active Adults activity center. Somehow I couldn’t able to continue because my work schedule. Since I stop coming to fitness, I felt depressed.”
- “It makes me healthy but can’t do regularly because of lack of transportation.”



Fitness Assessments

Program managers arranged for 33 participants to complete individual physical readiness assessments between July 2013 and December 2014. Between November 2013 and December 2014, program managers conducted 34 senior fitness tests (with 32 participants).

Refugee elder participants noticed improved strength and endurance resulting from attending Aurora Center for Active Adults exercise classes. In conversations during the second reporting period, one Nepali-Bhutanese elder said how the center has changed his life: "I have used a cane for the past 10 to 15 years, but in the last five days, I threw it away because I don't need it anymore since I'm getting stronger from the exercise classes."



Integration

The Aurora Center for Active Adults provided a venue and opportunities for integration. Several patrons of the center not otherwise connected with the program became strong supporters.

Over the life of the grant, at least 15 volunteers helped with instruction and coordination of exercise classes, English classes and health literacy education. They shared meals and developed friendships across cultural lines.

Orientations and cultural presentations occurred during group meals.

A refugee simulation exercise was organized by a group from Bhutan in which people from non-refugee communities experienced a simulation of what it takes to adapt to life in the U.S.

Elder refugee program participants took ownership of the Elder Refugee Program by volunteering at events; organizing meals, celebrations, and cultural presentations for Aurora Center for Active Adults staff and patrons; providing insight into the program and activities; and recruiting others in their communities to join.



Volunteers of America Meals

Representatives from Volunteers of America served 10 group meals, each feeding 34 to 100 U.S.-born and refugee participants.

Volunteers of America also provided at least 182 food bags. The bags included culturally appropriate meal necessities for three meals, representing a total of 546 meals delivered to refugees' homes.



Education: Health Literacy, Nutrition, English, Citizenship

Health Literacy: At least 14 participants attended Visiting Nurse Association clinics, which included a foot exam, lotion application, toenail clipping and medication review.

Nutrition: The Spring Institute's Project SHINE Americorps volunteer attended weekly classes and events at the Aurora Center for Active Adults and provided health literacy information, tools and nutrition education to program participants throughout the grant period.

English Classes: Volunteers taught ongoing English classes. At least 16 participants attended regularly.

Citizenship Awareness: Program managers coordinated activities to provide education around citizenship processes relevant to older adults with refugee status, including:

- research
- conversations with United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and Colorado Refugee Services Program representatives

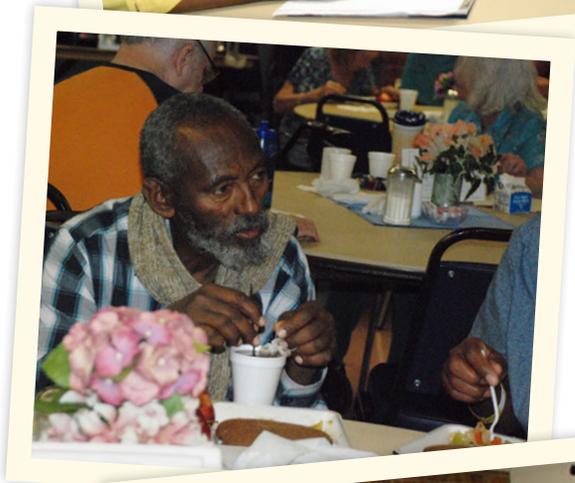


- Office of Refugee Resettlement Older Adult Refugee grant recipient conference call
- citizenship workshop by a Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains immigration attorney
- Burundian community leader meeting
- elder refugee taskforce on citizenship

Interpretation/Language Access

Program managers developed at least 11 guides, translated into Amharic, Karen, Kunama, Nepali, Somali and Tigrinya, to improve communication among participants, volunteers and Aurora Center for Active Adults staff. Many of the guides were translated into Amharic, Karen, Kunama, Nepali, Somali and Tigrinya.

The DRCOG Area Agency on Aging developed a limited-English proficiency plan for the Colorado Refugee Services Program, and allocated separate funds for Area Agency on Aging and Aurora Center for Active Adults staff to access a language line through Optimal Phone Interpreters. Between Optimal Phone Interpreters and the contract with Colorado African Organization community navigators, Area Agency on Aging staff can now communicate with people in over 40 languages.



Language Identification, I Speak...

Albanian Fjalë Shqipje	Arabic أنا تكلم العربية	Bulgarian Аз говоря български
Cantonese 我講廣東話	Haitian Creole Mwen pale Kreyòl Ayisyen	Croatian Ja govorim hrvatski
Czech Já mluvím česky	Farsi من فارسی صحبت می کنم	French Je parle Français
German Ich spreche Deutsch	Georgian მე ვსაუბრობ ქართულ ენაზე	Greek Μιλώ τα ελληνικά
Gujarati કુચ્ચરલી બોલું છું	Hindi मैं हिंदी बोलता हूँ	Hmong Kuv hais lus Hmoob
Italian Parlo Italiano	Japanese 日本語を話します	Kirundi Ndavuga i Kirundi
Korean 한국말 합니다	Mandarin 我講國語 - 我讲普通话	Polish Mówię po Polsku
Portuguese Eu falo Português	Romanian Vorbesc românește	Russian Я говорю по-русски

Transportation and Field Trips

Transportation played a key role in the program. Program managers conducted the following transportation activities:

- collaborated with the Regional Transportation District to provide public bus travel trainings in all neighborhoods with participants attending the Aurora Center for Active Adults
- produced bus travel route cards
- arranged senior transportation for frail participants
- provided bus tickets to Aurora Center for Active Adults program participants
- collaborated with First Ride, Seniors' Resource Center and the Regional Transportation District

More than 30 refugee elders attended three field trips. Trip destinations included Chatfield State Park Farm (a local museum and historic farm) and the Denver Botanic Gardens.

Hiddenbrook Apartments

In August 2015, program managers started global Zumba classes at Hiddenbrook Apartments, a complex in a neighborhood with a large refugee population. Within the grant period, the program reached at least nine Office of Refugee Resettlement-eligible participants 60 or older from Bhutan, Burma, Ethiopia and Eritrea. The class also attracted at least 12 Office of Refugee Resettlement-eligible participants younger than 60 (many of whom have disabilities or are caregivers for elder parents) and at least 10 non-refugee participants, resulting in an integrated classroom environment. The Zumba instructor expressed interest in teaching drumming and cane kung fu in the future.



LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES

Structure

Recommended best practice: Keep the structure of any new program simple and easy to understand. Plan how communication will occur among service providers, funders and participants. Ensure that participant voices are considered in all aspects of programming.

Community Navigators

Lessons learned: Community navigators were a key component to conducting all activities, and without them, the program would not have succeeded. Insufficient funding for community navigator hours was a constant challenge as community members often requested their presence, Aurora Center for Active Adults staff wanted them on-site as often as possible, and the program coordinator desired their time for trainings and mainstream education. Also, the community navigators expressed concern about having to select only a few elders to be part of the program due to budget and structural constraints.

Possible solution: Increase funding for community navigator hours and develop a clear structure for how hours will be used each month with community navigation participation.

Recommended best practice: Use community navigators who can make connections between their communities and mainstream services. Elders tend to trust people whom they know, who understand their wishes and who can explain things in their languages and through their cultural lenses. Trained community navigators can help mainstream organizations better reach potential clients by explaining cultural differences and providing advice about creating accessibility. Program managers working with elder refugees should allocate funds to support as many community navigator hours as possible.

The Voice of the Community

Recommended best practice: Whenever possible, get input from refugee participants, community navigators and other community members to align program offerings with cultural needs and expectations, and to make them fun and appealing to community members. Gather feedback in several informal and formal ways. Responses may be different depending on the way feedback is gathered (such as location, comfort level, person delivering surveys). Seek ways to engage elders from refugee communities so they feel ownership of the program design.

Before beginning a program or outreach project ask how people in refugee communities did similar things before they came to the U.S. Discover to what potential participants are accustomed and explore opportunities for learning new concepts or having new experiences. For example, if designing projects around exercise and disease prevention, ask questions like, “What do people do for exercise where you’re from?” “Where and how do people gather?” “How do people get the medical care they need?” “Who do people consult when they’re

sick or injured?” “What have you found to be different or the same here?” “What do you miss?” “What do you think is good or bad here?” “What is confusing or interesting to you about managing your health in the U.S.?” (See “Cultural Considerations” for more detail.)

If possible, conduct a formal or informal community survey ahead of time or consult similar surveys to better understand what the communities will accept and use. Two documents worth consulting are:

- The Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE), five-year study measuring integration of refugees living in Colorado (Colorado Office of Economic Security, 2016)
- *An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration*, Chapter 3.4 – Engaging Elder Refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2002)

Cultural Considerations

Lessons learned: Several times during the course of the grant, activities needed to be changed or eliminated because of cultural taboos and norms. When activities could not be changed, participation waned. Below are three examples:

1. **Volunteers of America meals:** Volunteers from refugee communities participating in meal preparation expressed concerns about preparing the food including standing for long hours, time constraints, lack of compensation and feelings of inadequacy in preparing large meals in industrial kitchens. Some elders also had trouble trusting that the food was prepared according to culturally accepted customs. Program managers explored many options, and although they valued the program’s benefits, they ultimately determined that funds were better spent to increase community navigation hours at the Aurora Center for Active Adults.

Possible solution: Create an option for participants to cook food for a large group in their homes and bring it to a group meal. Participants often indicated such a solution would be achievable and desirable. Such a solution would have bypassed many of the aforementioned issues. Another solution used later in the program was to order food from a local, trusted, and possibly refugee-owned, restaurant.

2. **Visiting Nurse Association clinics:** Clinics included a foot exam, lotion application, toenail clipping and medication review. Participants enjoyed these benefits. However, many expressed discomfort as there were often religious and cultural concerns around touching feet depending on the age and gender of the person performing the exam. The Visiting Nurse Association, Aurora Center for Active Adults, and Area Agency on Aging staff learned that foot-touching is considered a very intimate act in many refugee cultures, and concerns affected participation numbers. Several achievable options were pursued, such as ensuring the person doing the exams was the same gender as the person receiving them. Ultimately, however, program managers prioritized increasing community navigation hours over the clinics and reallocated funds accordingly.

Possible solution: Show a video of the foot exam to groups of elders from many communities ahead of time to get their feedback on how it will be perceived and whether elders would be interested in participating. This can build interest and momentum as well as allow time to adapt the program to cultural needs and expectations.

- Dancing:** Although the Zumba classes at the Aurora Center for Active Adults and Hiddenbrook Apartments were highly popular for participants from Burma and Bhutan, no Somalis were interested in participating even though they expressed interest in other kinds of exercise. The community navigator for Somali populations explained that there was interest, but a cultural and religious expectation that men and women would not dance together kept people away. Because scheduling separate classes was difficult within the structure of the program, many Somalis who might have participated did not. Separate classes are an option in the future.

Possible solution: Work enough flexibility into the program to schedule separate men's and women's classes, if deemed appropriate. Another possible solution is to offer a variety of exercise classes, so people can choose activities that fit their cultural and religious needs.

Recommended best practice: Whenever possible, consult community members or community navigators on the cultural appropriateness of an activity, especially if it involves touching and food. Show a video of an activity when recruiting people, so they know what to expect, and can explain why they may be hesitant to participate. Be sure to get input on the activities from women and men as there may be different cultural expectations based on gender. Work flexibility into programming and be prepared to change an activity if it does not meet the needs of a certain group.

Lisa McCroskey, former program coordinator, stated, "It is highly important for mainstream organizations, such as Volunteers of America, to engage diverse communities in dialogue to discuss their unique cultural needs and preferences. These conversations lead to unearthed understandings about how to create accessibility and respect for these minority communities when working with existing services. Without these conversations, mainstream culture is often applied to minority communities, which results in minimal participation or accessibility for these populations, from both a linguistic and cultural standpoint. Whenever mainstream organizations adapt to these diverse cultural needs, a substantially higher number of community members can be reached by needed services and a greater trust in these organizations resonates within these communities."

“Elder” at a Younger Age

Lessons learned: When services were advertised to elder refugees, referrals were often received for people who were younger than 60. This is because, in most refugee communities, people are considered to be an elder at a younger age than in U.S. culture. There are many reasons for the disparity, including:

- health problems are often acquired through hard work and hard lives
- cultural expectations of caring for parents and grandparents are often different from mainstream U.S. culture

In *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration*, Chapter 3.4 “Engaging Refugee Elders,” the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states “the higher rate of chronic and disabling conditions among resettled refugees may make them appear older than they are” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2002, p. 280). This is also noted in the Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE) study conducted with refugee communities in Colorado during the past five years, which indicates that many refugees between 50 and 60 years old behave similarly to and have similar health concerns as those who are over 60 years old (Colorado Office of Economic Security, 2016).

Recommended best practices: Design programming to accommodate a cultural interpretation of elders who may be younger than traditional U.S. cultural expectations and guidelines. Remember that those who have suffered for a long time and worked physically demanding jobs their entire lives may present as much older than someone of the same age who has worked in an office. A 45-year-old person from Bhutan who has farmed most of her life and experienced the physical and mental trauma of war may have the same needs as an 85-year-old who worked as a receptionist in the U.S.



Fun and Engagement

Lessons learned: Using fun, social activities like dance classes and weight room training provides opportunities for seniors who are normally quite reserved and isolated to thrive, smile, play, develop trust and reach out. Having service providers participate in activities alongside participants contributes to trusting relationships which form the foundation for establishing access to other services.

For example, the Zumba class at Hiddenbrook Apartments had intrinsic value as an opportunity for exercise and socialization. The program coordinator participated in Zumba classes with participants who came because it was fun and decreased isolation. Over time, and once they built rapport with each other, the Zumba instructor, and the program coordinator, the coordinator began to incorporate nutrition and health education into classes. Once trust was established and it participants became aware of the program coordinator's expertise, several participants expressed health needs that could be addressed quickly by connecting them with mainstream health care organizations.

Recommended best practice: Use fun, relevant and engaging activities to increase participation. Engage elders in program design and implementation. If you have identified other educational or behavioral goals, incorporate them into the program when trust and community are well-established.

Welcoming Spaces

Recommended best practice: Conduct activities using a space which is welcoming to provide possibilities for people to get care when needed, create life-giving relationships and learn about exercise and nutrition. Posting signs and information in several languages is a core way to demonstrate to participants that they are welcome in a space.

Multiple Language Services

Lessons learned: Grant activities have enabled the Aurora Center for Active Adults to have access to an interpreter phone line, translate documents to respond to frequently-asked questions and a bulletin board for information and notices about upcoming events in many languages. Providing information in multiple languages demonstrates a commitment to serving diverse populations and gives front desk staff and community members several options for communication if community navigators are not present.

Recommended best practice: Provide multiple ways to communicate in many languages and teach key staff how to use them in order to create a welcoming space that participants can use independently, regardless of language or country of origin.

Volunteer Time and Commitment

Lessons learned: Volunteer English teachers provided experienced, structured classes in which participants indicated they found value. However, using volunteers did not ensure that there would always be teachers available. In the final grant period, volunteers were unable to provide services and program managers made referral to English classes at Colorado African Organization and Emily Griffith Technical College's in-home English tutoring program.

Possible solution: Contract with a local university or other entity to provide reliable interns, but keep opportunities open for other volunteers to teach if they are interested.

Recommended best practice: Source volunteers from a university or other entity to provide reliable interns and have specific volunteer job descriptions. Keep some opportunities open for other volunteers to participate as interested (such as passing out bus tickets or helping with a meal).

Program Sustainability

Lessons learned: After the initial recruiting period, word of the program spread in target communities, and the number of interested participants exceeded the number of people the program could serve.

Participation was limited due to:

- the Aurora Center for Active Adult's concerns about its limited capacity to handle large volumes of people with language and cultural differences
- concerns about safety and the need to educate participants to use equipment properly
- participants' stated confusion about Aurora Center for Active Adults rules
- age limits (people younger than 60 who were considered elders in their communities wanted to participate)
- cost of membership

The structure of the program changed several times throughout the grant period, with input from all parties involved, to address challenges. Structural changes addressed many issues and made it possible for the program to continue, but it also made it more difficult for new participants to become involved in a timely manner. Turning away elders or family members of participants proved to be culturally unacceptable in many communities and placed the community navigators in difficult, and often contradictory, positions of maintaining positive relationships in their communities while simultaneously serving as gatekeepers of services.

Possible solutions:

- Structure programming and costs to be flexible and accommodate high numbers of people quickly, while still considering the needs of the facilities providing space and services.
- Incorporate flexibility on age limits for participation.
- Involve community navigators, elders and providers in designing the program's structure.
- Create volunteer ambassador positions to introduce newcomers to facilities and create a welcoming environment. These could be filled by U.S.-born participants or people from refugee communities.
- Work with several venues, so one location is not overwhelmed with several new participants at one time.

Recommended best practice: Before designing a program, ask:

- Is this program structure sustainable? Does it have sufficient staff and funding to continue well into the future?
- Are the benefits to the community long-term and can they continue regardless of funding streams?
- Who is paying for what?
- How will the community be affected if funding is no longer available?
- Are there other options for covering the costs?
- What are participants' and service providers' expectations of and goals for the program?



Integration

Recommended best practices: Use every opportunity possible to engage potential volunteers who are interested making friends and learning more about people from refugee communities. Have ideas readily available if people ask how they can connect with participants. Keep some key phrases, simple volunteer activities and ways to engage with participants in a friendly manner on hand.

Service Provider Buy-In

Lesson learned from grant activities: By having a different process for program participants than for mainstream Aurora Center for Active Adults patrons, center staff perceived the program as separate from normal services. Throughout the course of the grant, the center and program managers worked together to set expectations for conducting activities at the center and serving program participants as members of the center. A particular challenge during the early stages of the grant was a perception by center staff that participants were not entitled to full use of facilities. Through persistence and constant communication, the program became an integrative experience that worked for all parties involved.

Recommended best practice: Ensure the buy-in of mainstream providers. Help partners and venues discover what they gain from reaching out to diverse elders. Make sure all program goals are clear from the beginning (for participants, mainstream providers and grant or funding partners). Make integration (participants' independent use of mainstream services) a primary goal of the program. If possible, repeatedly provide service providers with reminders of the benefits and goals of program to ensure all partners are working toward the same objectives.



Basic Needs (Child Care, Cooking and Transportation)

Lessons learned: More men attended Aurora Center for Active Adults activities and more women attended Hiddenbrook Apartments activities. Program managers suspect the disparity in attendance by men and women at the two locations is due to women having more duties at home. Hiddenbrook Apartments was more amenable to allowing participants to bring children and its staff was more flexible in scheduling activities. Flexible scheduling allowed participants to arrive late if they had other obligations. For example, one woman needed to pray immediately before class and usually arrived slightly late. Other women picked children up from the bus stop after school and brought them to class.

Transportation for field trips and to get to the Aurora Center for Active Adults presented a major challenge in retaining participation, especially through the winter. Throughout the grant, program managers pursued several creative solutions, but transportation remained an ongoing issue.

Possible solutions: Provide activities, such as Zumba, cane kung fu, drumming, and Silver Sneakers in venues in neighborhoods where elders live (such as in Hiddenbrook Apartments). Research possibilities for transportation to and from the Aurora Center for Active Adults that would not require walking long distances or waiting for extended periods of time. Contract with a local transportation organization for a designated number of field trips for the year. Set the dates but leave the location open. Consult with elders in the communities about where they would want to go on field trips.

Recommended best practices: Provide services in a variety of locations – in participant’s neighborhoods and outside –so people can experience new things and also have access to activities nearby. Be flexible to ensure transportation, child care and meal preparation can be accommodated. Seek community partners in neighborhoods close to participants’ homes, so more people can easily participate. When providing services outside areas where most participants live, consider transportation options and provide training on how to use such options. For example, ensure people have bus tickets to get to and from the activities.

CONCLUSION

The Services to Older Adult Refugees grant enabled the Area Agency on Aging to form partnerships with traditional resettlement services and begin to explore the contributions of older adult refugees to their communities and U.S.-born neighbors. The grant also enabled older adults from refugee communities to access Older Americans Act and mainstream services. This is a unique program in the U.S., and the best practices identified herein may guide other service providers in working with older adults from refugee communities.

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