



SERVICES TO OLDER ADULT REFUGEES:

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.

Through its groundbreaking program with older adults from refugee communities, the Area Agency on Aging has arrived at best practices in the following areas:

- structure
- community navigators
- the voice of the community
- cultural considerations
- “elder” at a younger age
- fun and engagement
- welcoming spaces
- multiple language services
- volunteer time and commitment
- program sustainability
- integration
- service provider buy-in
- basic needs met (child care, cooking and transportation)

The Area Agency on Aging offers the suggestions that follow as best practices for organizations working with elders with refugee status.

Structure

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

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 own 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 Met (Child Care, Cooking and Transportation)

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.