



Effectively Engaging Refugees and Immigrants

Action Brief

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Photo: Reaching refugees and immigrants is a priority for the Asian Health Services. Multilingual and multicultural health workers provide information at farmers' markets where community members shop.

During the “Trusted Messenger Learning Labs: Effectively Engaging Refugees and Immigrants”, Jane Pak, Co-Executive Director of Refugee & Immigrant Transitions discussed the nuanced definition of refugees. The legal criteria established by the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone fearing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group membership, or political opinion, thereby impacting their access to services and legal status.

Today's challenges like climate-induced displacement and navigating the complexities of immigration statuses add to the burdens of refugees.

Community-based organizations need to comprehend the diverse needs and context of refugees and immigrants.

Her call to action emphasized the shared humanity and the urgency of addressing pressing matters during community outreach while offering essential services and resources to communities.

This **Action Brief** is a product of the series **"Trusted Messenger Learning Labs: From Discovery to Action."** It is based on the eighth session held on December 7, 2023, and features excerpts from a discussion with Ahmed Sahid (President & CEO, Somali Family Service of San Diego), Jane Pak (Co-Executive Director, Refugee & Immigrant Transitions; Adjunct Professor, University of San Francisco), and Basim Elkarra (Executive Director, Council on American Islamic Relations, Sacramento Valley Office).

What Partners are Saying and Doing

How do refugee and immigrant communities find out who you are and what you do?

Basim Elkarra: We (CAIR) go where they're at. We're at the mosque every Friday, tabling. We're tabling at the ethnic grocery stores, we'll put up posters in different languages, and we're attending events. We also have an art gallery in Sacramento, where partner organizations use it for youth programming. One of our partners did a robotics program for Afghan youth, and other one did an arts program for Afghan youth. We make sure that when they come in and participate in these programs, they are introduced to our services as well.

Jane Pak: We show up in these communities and remain present and consistent. At Refugee and Immigrant Transitions, we offer a holistic range of services, in the framework of building community. Collectively, our staff speak over twenty languages. We work in schools, and after school programs that provide peer leadership and youth leadership programs. We provide adults with language classes, citizenship classes, in terms of case management, community leadership and engagement.

How do you provide language and communication access for diverse communities?

Ahmed Sahid: We enlist community members as co-designers in our education outreach. Prior to COVID-19, we had community ambassadors lead in-language storytelling programs to educate and combat misinformation about the MMR (Measles, Mumps, and Rubella) vaccination, and we were able to use the same programs for the COVID-19 vaccines. During the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, we filmed videos promoting health insurance enrollment with community members speaking their language. In San Diego, the East African Community and refugee community had the highest enrollment in health insurance, so including the community in program design produced better outcomes.

Jane Pak: We know that within immigrant communities, youth often play unique roles in language bridging and navigating community resources, and so forth. Our Youth Wellness Ambassadors program is a way to uplift what youth are already doing. Yemeni students who are amazing ambassadors, shared that some parents in the community were very resistant to getting their kids vaccinated because of the misinformation. After the students shared the importance of vaccinations that they received through the state, they in turn educated their parents.

Who do you partner and collaborate with to address refugee and immigrant needs?

Basim Elkarra: We partner with organizations that provide specific services such as food banking, mental health services, housing assistance, and job placement. When you uplift others and support other organizations, it supports the entire effort and lifts everyone up together. In Sacramento, we've worked hard to get funding and support to other organizations. I think we've come a long way seeing organization working so hard to make sure that the messaging is getting out. By any means necessary, we find every avenue to get the message out to the community.

Ahmed Sahid: As a border county, San Diego experiences large influxes of migrants so logistically it is an overwhelming challenge to overcome without partner organizations. We could not do our work without collaboration from UC San Diego, the San Diego Refugee Forum, and the workforce partnership. We also collaborate with faith-based organizations that provide essential services to the local immigrant and refugee populations.

The Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications, housed within the Office of Planning and Research, initiates and executes campaigns related to the state's highest priority public awareness and community outreach efforts. The intent of a single state entity coordinating California's most important campaigns is so that the state can realize more inclusive and effective outcomes while preventing equity gaps in statewide outreach.

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