

# Community Engagement: Effective Messaging and Trauma-Informed Care Approaches

As refugees begin to adjust to life in the United States, they are faced with new challenges and opportunities. They may need to learn a new language, navigate new communities, adjust to new cultural norms and obtain a new job. Despite these challenges, refugees’ resilience and hard work have continued to strengthen resettlement communities. This guide explores welcoming communities and offers recommendations on how to engage the private sector. It also discusses how communities can implement trauma-informed care practices and ultimately contribute to refugee mental health and well-being.

## Supper Clubs

Refugee Supper Clubs, based on the universal community language of food, are held in various states and cities across the nation<sup>1,2</sup>. They facilitate opportunities for refugees in the U.S. and other community members to come together to share a meal. Through these Supper Clubs, long-time neighbors and newly arriving refugees partake in a cultural exchange through the safe space of a home-cooked meal. Though language around refugees may include the difficult journeys and associated trauma, the individual and collective strengths of refugees should be acknowledged. The refugees who offer a piece of their culinary culture are great examples of the resilience and strength of so many newcomers. Refugees participating in these Supper Groups illustrate the power of a welcoming community through preparing food, engaging in dialogue, and offering their own expertise through cooking classes. Without the surrounding community eager to provide support in this unique way, refugees may find integrating into their new hometowns much more difficult.



"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

“The New Colossus” by Ezra Laurus,  
Inscription on the Statue of Liberty

### Inside this Information Guide

## Importance of a Welcoming Community

Welcoming communities can help foster good mental health for refugees through cultivating positive social connections. Individuals benefiting from a welcoming environment and good mental health—

- Are sick less often<sup>3</sup>
- Miss fewer days of work<sup>4</sup>
- Can better reach their success and leadership goals<sup>5</sup>

## Effective Messaging

When conducting outreach, share facts and highlight strengths of refugee communities. Reflect on what makes refugees a vital component of the community. The following are good pieces to incorporate:

- Refugees are resilient
- Refugees are eager to work and have high rates of job retention<sup>6</sup>

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# Community Engagement Strategies

## Identify Community Opportunities

**Involve** schools, university student groups, churches and businesses that may have service goals, volunteer, or internship requirements:

- Many **businesses** have initiatives devoted to social corporate responsibility where they focus on community service efforts. Consider including the staff to help at a World Refugee Day event.
- Many **universities** also require a service learning component for students. This is a good way to introduce students to refugee communities and provide additional support to refugees.
- **Church groups** are also very active in community service efforts. Some church groups have sponsored refugees by helping to find housing or with transportation to doctors appointments, as well as English language tutoring.

## Provide Ideas for Community Partners

### *What to say when an organization asks how they can help?*

**Organize** an event, like a 5K run, to raise awareness and funds for a local refugee resettlement agency.

**Start** a school supply or clothing donation collection in your company, school, or faith-based organization. Many agencies are in need of school supplies, clothing, and furniture for families.



## Volunteer highlight

Volunteers can play a crucial role for resettlement agencies by providing additional social support for refugees. The experience is mutually beneficial, as both the volunteer and refugee each meet someone new and learn about a new culture. Below are two volunteers who made a difference in their local refugee communities:

- In 2016 a high school student in Washington state, Jared Freeland, collected over 300 blankets as his Eagle Scout project. Jared gathered donations from church members and even went door to door. He donated all of the blankets to local refugee families. He said he didn't know much about refugees prior to beginning his project, but is happy to help the local refugee community.<sup>8</sup>
- Karen Freudenberger, a volunteer at the USCRI office in Vermont, found several of the clients she volunteered with had an agricultural background. Having worked abroad on international development projects, she assisted the refugee community in starting their own goat farm. Goat meat can be difficult to find in the United States, but is popular among many refugee community cuisines.<sup>9</sup>

## Refugees Volunteer too!

Involve refugees in volunteer efforts, they are also invested in their new communities, and will often be eager to participate in local community festivals.

- Syrian refugees in Seattle were among the volunteers of an event hosted by the local Muslim community to help feed homeless veterans for Thanksgiving 2016.<sup>10</sup>



# Targeted Community Engagement (Mental Health Providers)

## Engaging Mental Health Community Partners

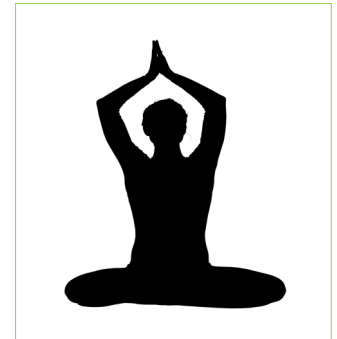
**Build collaborations with mental health service providers.** This is important so that when you have a client that needs these services, the provider is aware of your population and their particular needs.

**Offer education to local service providers new to working with refugees:**

- **Who is a refugee?**
  - A refugee is someone who has left their country due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.
- **Examples of cultural considerations**
  - Somali refugees may be uncomfortable or unwilling to take prescription medications for mental health issues.
  - Burmese refugees may believe that mental illness is a result of “spirit possession” and prefer religious leaders to intervene.
  - Bhutanese refugees that struggle with depression may refer to their “heart-mind being hurt.”
  - Syrian refugees may be more familiar with seeking out traditional healers, instead of psychiatric or mental health services.
- **Vital services for refugee populations, such as interpretation**
  - Providers can contact language line services or face-to-face interpretation if they have never used interpretation before. See NPCT’s [InfoGuide](#) for further information.

## Louisville Mental Health Providers Group

The Mental Health Coordinator at Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Jane Evans, identified a need for coordinated services and developed a bi-monthly mental health provider workgroup. The group created a supportive environment to address challenging topics. It focuses on increasing collaboration among refugee resettlement agencies, mental health providers and other medical providers, school representatives, university representatives and the public library. This initiative helps to bridge the gap between the resettlement agencies and other service providers. As a result of the collaboration, more streamlined services are now available to clients. In addition to the provider workgroup, Kentucky Refugee Ministries offers access to holistic services like yoga, hiking, sewing, and support groups for both men and women.



*“By closely collaborating with each other, the mental health service providers in Louisville have greatly increased access to services by lowering barriers such as transportation and service follow-up, and increased capacity for quality services within each agency by sharing information and training with each other.”*

*Jane Evans, Kentucky Refugee Ministries*



Kentucky Refugee Ministries Hiking Group

The [National Partnership for Community Training](#) is a program of Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services. NPCT is a training and technical assistance program which supports refugee resettlement workers and service providers through national capacity building and collaborative efforts. For more information on this document and for research purposes, please contact [partnership@gcjfcs.org](mailto:partnership@gcjfcs.org) or (305) 349-1220. Gulf Coast Jewish Family and Community Services received \$225,000 in funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90XR0027. The project was financed with 97% of Federal funds and 3% by non-governmental sources. The contents of this resource are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.



# Trauma-Informed Care

## What is trauma?

Trauma is believed to be an experience that overwhelms our usual coping mechanisms. Trauma is not experienced the same way by each individual. Something that may be traumatic to one person may not be traumatic to someone else. Individuals who have experienced trauma can be extremely resilient and can work through their past trauma.

## What is trauma-informed care?

- Understanding the impact of trauma
- Recognizing signs of trauma and responding in a meaningful way
- Being mindful not to re-traumatize the individual

## Trauma-informed care in refugee resettlement

Experiencing trauma is common among the general population and is not specific to refugees. Many refugees, however, may have experienced trauma on their journey to the United States. Traumatic events can include experiencing war, living in a refugee camp, and adapting to life in the United States.

A trauma-informed agency is a welcoming agency that can help ease the transition of adjusting to life in the United States. Resettlement staff can be trained on what trauma is and how to provide trauma-informed case management and other services.

Trauma-informed care in the refugee resettlement context includes providing appropriate interpretation and translation services as well as culturally-informed services. Case workers and other resettlement staff should recognize that some clients may not view mental health from the Western perspective, but instead refer to issues or conflict within the family or describe somatic complaints. Agencies should be prepared to connect clients with mental health services and should be aware that mental health issues may manifest some time after the initial resettlement period.

Alternative approaches to mental healthcare may include activities, such as engaging in community gardens, knitting groups, yoga classes, or peer mentoring. Ensuring these services are delivered from a strengths-based perspective is one way to incorporate a trauma-informed approach.



## Epigenetics

Epigenetics refers to “external modifications to DNA that turns genes ‘on’ or ‘off.’” A study found that trauma can be passed down from mother to child. Holocaust survivors produce less cortisol—a stress hormone “that helps return the body to normal after trauma.” Children of holocaust survivors have the same low cortisol amounts, but with higher levels of the enzyme that breaks down this important hormone. The enzyme is believed to have been passed down genetically. This is important to know when working with refugees as even those who may not have personally experienced the trauma of war, may have altered DNA as a result of the trauma experienced by their parents. Children of trauma survivors may have a lower threshold for stress and manifest psychological symptoms.<sup>11</sup>

## How trauma impacts the brain

- Those who have experienced trauma may be hyper-alert or hyper-vigilant. This may mean that they may be more on-guard or more concerned about outside threats.
- Traumatic memories are believed to be stored in the brain differently than normal memories. In some cases individuals may not be able to fully remember the traumatic event.
- Witnessing traumatic events can have a similar effect on an individual as experiencing the event personally. For example, witnessing someone being killed or physically assaulted during a war-time situation can remain in the brain as an unprocessed memory. That memory can then be triggered causing individuals to feel as though they are re-experiencing the event themselves.



# Trauma-Informed Communities

Trauma informed communities are those in which the community, including the local government and service providers, understands what trauma is and can recognize its signs. This means that all systems are trauma-informed including law enforcement systems, schools, hospitals, social service organizations, and refugee resettlement agencies. The community responds to client concerns or symptoms of trauma in a way that helps and does not re-traumatize.

## Featured Models

The following examples have been developed and tailored to individual locales; however, the principles can be applied to other cities and states.

### Tarpon Springs

Tarpon Springs, Florida is working toward becoming a trauma-informed community. Tarpon Springs has made a concerted effort to ensure all services in the city are trauma-informed. Settings such as schools, housing authorities, the justice system, and other government agencies are encouraged to approach interactions with community members from a trauma-informed perspective. Some of these settings incorporate trainings on the definition and signs of trauma, how their clients may be experiencing and exhibiting trauma, and how to best approach their clients from a trauma-informed perspective. Tarpon Springs' housing authority received tailored training regarding the trauma some clients may face due to losing their home and sense of security.<sup>12</sup>

### San Francisco

The trauma-informed community building (TICB) model emerged from the experience of the Bridge Housing Corporation in San Francisco, an organization that manages affordable housing units. This model recognizes the trauma faced by many of its residents and has developed strategies on how to best provide services in this context. The TICB model focuses on four principles:

- Do not harm
- Acceptance/meeting the client where they are
- Community empowerment/recognizing self-determination
- Reflective process/making the TICB model a sustainable model for future generations<sup>13</sup>

Consider incorporating culturally appropriate services, as described below, in any trauma-informed community that resettles refugee populations.

## Implementing culturally-sensitive components

**Promote** collaboration, peer support, and empowerment among staff, community partners, and clients.

**Share** steps service providers can take to improve their trauma-informed care practices and approaches.

- Offer culturally appropriate interpretation services during parent-teacher meetings and patient-doctor visits
- Provide culturally appropriate meals during summer time youth programs or hospital stays
- Schedule refugee female patients to be seen by a female physician, if possible

**Recognize** cultural differences in exhibiting difficult mental health symptoms.

- Refugees may present with somatic complaints, such as headaches or stomach pains, rather than revealing psychological issues, such as sadness or racing thoughts.
- Refugees may also not be open to discussing suicide. Refugees may allude to having suicidal thoughts instead of expressing these feelings directly.

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## Resources

### [SAMHSA](#)

SAMHSA offers a definition of trauma-informed care, various trauma specific modalities, and other resources on their website.

### [ACES Connections](#)

ACES Connections resource center offers information regarding the trauma-informed communities movement nationally. This includes best practices sites that are implementing trauma-informed care, trauma-informed guides and toolkits, as well as webinars and trainings on how to make your agency trauma-informed.

### [Welcoming America](#)

Welcoming America has many great resources on developing welcoming communities. Their resource library includes tools specific to welcoming refugee communities and the benefits refugees bring to their receiving communities.