

Working with Immigrant/Refugee Families

A Practical Guide



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Overview

Since the 1980s, the United States has continued to admit the largest number of refugees in its history, and there are no signs that the steady stream of immigrants coming to America will decrease anytime soon. While the countries of origin of immigrants/refugees tend to change over time, the difficulties these groups face in their new, adopted country remain constant.

For these immigrant/refugee families who have left behind their homes, possessions, jobs, and family and friends, resettling and rebuilding their lives in a new country is an intimidating and traumatic ordeal. Immigrant/refugee families must strive to work toward understanding American culture, language, and social norms while at the same time raising their families and retaining their cultural identity.

Immigrant/refugee families have faced difficulties in their home country. Also, their experiences of normal life are different here as compared to their country of origin. This is especially true for the older generations and for the entire male population, both of which will experience the most severe role shifts within their families and their community.

Issues associated with social adjustment may at times be overwhelming and can be linked to the ability of the family and community to provide mutual support during resettlement. Mutual Assistance Associations as well as places of worship within the cultural community can enhance the immigrant/refugee family's ability to participate in schools, civic affairs, and medical/health services in the wider community.

To work with immigrant/refugee families, your organization will need to:

- Be clear and honest about your purpose for seeking to work with immigrant/refugee families
- Understand the resources you can provide and their relevance to families
- Understand the immigrant/refugee culture and be aware of the means used to access the community

Working with immigrant/refugee families can strengthen your organization and provide programs and resources for families in need. But it means doing business differently, and it requires a commitment by your organization's staff and board of directors to learn about cultural norms that seem incongruent with those within your organization. You will, therefore, benefit greatly if you make



Immigrants or Refugees?

There is a marked difference between immigrants and refugees. Although Western definitions are used interchangeably, immigrants are typically people that have chosen to move to another country while refugees are people who have been forced to leave their homeland. This will be an important distinction as you begin to think about the population you seek to serve.



Strengthening the immigrant/refugee family will enhance its overall ability to participate in the wider community, assuming programs and resources are offered in a comfortable, culturally appropriate manner.





Values and Norms

Values and norms embedded in language, religion, philosophy, customs, and social organizations such as the family are important variables affecting immigrant/refugee behavior.



important to be respectful and to understand that many families may initially be suspicious. The following questions are categorized under topical headings and are just a sample and a place for you to begin. While designed to gather information, the questions—and answers you receive—will help you build a productive relationship with the immigrant/refugee population.



Cultural Understanding Worksheet

Opening

- May I ask you some questions about yourself?

General

- How long have you been living in the United States?

- Did you come to the United States alone or with others?

- What were some of your feelings when you first arrived?

- What did you think of the place you lived when you first came to this country?

- How long have you lived in your current place of residence?

- Other questions _____



Organizational Assessment



If the mission of your organization is to work with immigrant/refugee families, it will be essential to take the time to assess your organizational capacity to meet the growing needs of those families. Included in this section is an “Organizational Assessment Worksheet.” We suggest you use this assessment as a framework to understand the steps to take as you begin to provide resources and services.

The purpose of these questions is to help you gain a deeper and broader understanding of the work required to operate successfully within a given immigrant/refugee culture. While there is no fail-safe way to ensure that an organization evolves into one that is culturally competent, experience shows that those organizations that have meaningfully addressed the following issues are significantly more prepared than those who have not. A realistic assessment will identify opportunities for growth that can then be forged into a plan to develop your organization’s cultural competence.



Organizational Assessment Worksheet

The questions below will assist you in determining the current capacity of your organization to work with immigrant/refugee families.

- Has your organization worked with immigrant/refugee families in the past? If so, what worked and what didn't work?

- Does your organization currently work with immigrant/refugee families?

