

## Lending a Helping Hand: Refugee Resettlement Agencies Support Minnesota's Refugee Community During COVID-19 Pandemic

When COVID-19 first hit Minnesota, almost everyone was scrambling to get the latest news on the virus, the last roll of toilet paper at the stores, and the low-down on the state's plan to respond to the pandemic. This was just a small fraction of the challenges that recently arrived refugees faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Habiba Rashid of Minnesota Council of Churches remembers the early period of fear and confusion. Newly arrived refugees wondered whether the pandemic was real, why initially it appeared that white people were mostly affected, and then why suddenly it seemed minority communities became more at risk. Several resettlement agency partners of the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) – Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities of Southern Minnesota, the Minnesota Council of Churches, and the International Institute of Minnesota – witnessed this crisis and have since gone above and beyond to support our newest Minnesotans.

### Growing an Existing Partnership

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Building on a longer history of partnership, MDH began contracts with these four resettlement agencies in March 2020 to conduct outreach and engagement around COVID-19 with newly arrived refugees. Though many of these contracts ended in December 2020, this committed team continues to meet biweekly to get updates from MDH and elevate questions and concerns from their clients. While other outreach contracts focused on running culturally-specific COVID-19 hotlines, promoting social media health messaging, and conducting in-person testing or vaccination events, the outreach by the refugee resettlement agencies offered a distinct model. Rather than having community members call into a hotline, the agencies already had the contact information of their target population in the form of their existing clientele and reached out directly.

The agencies generally only connect with people for up to their first year in Minnesota unless they get involved in other agency programs; however, some were able to reach out to clients from as far as five years back with their COVID-19 funding from MDH. Having prior relationships with communities often under-resourced in the best of times, let alone in the midst of a pandemic, proved essential to getting crucial health information, resources, and support services to Minnesota's refugee community.

In addition to individual follow-up calls with clients, the resettlement agencies have offered many other valuable COVID-19 supports to newly arrived refugees. Some examples include weekly open virtual meetings to provide COVID-19 updates and listen to concerns, vaccination events, texts with links to key COVID-19 educational videos in multiple languages, employment and unemployment support, and food kits for those in need. However, this only scratches the surface of the agencies' vital outreach. Chhimi Wangchuk of the Minnesota Council of Churches explains, "When you live in the community, you work seven days a week."

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### Getting COVID Prevention Supplies to Families

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Resettlement agency staff also sent what they called COVID kits, packages containing key health information and supplies, to newly arrived refugee clients. Agencies determined what to include in the COVID kits by asking clients directly. In their weekly group calls with clients, Karin Blythe of Lutheran Social Services recalls asking families, "Are you able to get this kind of resource? Is it something you are struggling with right now?" to assess the most urgently-needed supplies. Based upon these needs and recommendations from MDH, agency staff gathered translated COVID-19 educational materials, disinfectant wipes and sprays, hand sanitizer, masks, thermometers, and hand soap for the kits.

Much like the families, the resettlement agency staff met challenges in getting the useful preventive supplies for their kits. Partnerships with local public health, MDH, and community members were key to getting the materials together. In one instance, putting together the COVID kits was quite literally a family affair. Kristina Hammell of Catholic Charities shared that their director's daughter sewed the masks and Hammell assembled the kits in her basement.

In a moment of cultural humility, agency staff quickly realized that you could not just send families supplies without proper explanations about how to use them. For instance, many families were unfamiliar with how to use a thermometer and needed guidance on what to do if they did run a temperature. Additionally, staff provided more detailed instruction on how to use disinfectant wipes and spray, which many did not realize needed to dry fully before the surfaces were considered sanitized.

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### Overcoming Myths and Misinformation

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Even though staff developed trusting relationships with their clients, misinformation has proved to be one of the greatest hurdles to overcome. "It has been a struggle for us to give messaging and hope that they trust us enough to go forward, even though another family might be whispering in their ear something different," remarked Kristina Hammell of Catholic Charities of Southern Minnesota. Similarly, Chhimi Wangchuk recalls the impactful role of social media, saying, "[T]here are people who appear as doctors or scientists, researchers, and [are] telling people all these bad things about the vaccine especially."

However, despite the myths circulating about COVID-19, the refugee resettlement agencies accomplished amazing things. They distributed key safety and hygiene supplies to their clients, listened to their needs and concerns, fiercely advocated for MDH to address these needs, and provided factual and nonjudgmental information about how refugee families could protect themselves and others from COVID-19. Sharing the story of one client, John Meyers of Catholic Charities recounted a family who went from being staunchly against getting the vaccine to becoming vocal ambassadors for others in their community to get the vaccine like they had. "In these cases, when we've seen them walk through that whole journey and then become advocates, that's been a very rewarding experience," he reflected.