

Collaborative links immigrants and refugees to human service supports

A collaborative that sprang from work done by the Department of Human Services (DHS) to help Allegheny County's immigrants and refugees better access the human services system is demonstrating positive impact. Those involved in the work of the collaborative, called Immigrant Services and Connections (ISAC), are encouraging any provider or eligible county resident in need of ISAC's help to contact the service.

ISAC came about after a needs assessment completed by DHS in the spring of 2013 revealed that service coordination and help in navigating the complex human service system were among the top needs of the county's growing refugee and immigrant populations. While some agencies did help some groups, DHS found gaps that needed to be addressed.

The department issued a competitive request for proposals, with eight submitted. Jewish Family & Children's Service (JF&CS) of Squirrel Hill, with decades of serving the county's refugee population, was selected as lead agency to provide service coordination and navigation under a \$1 million yearly contract. Other partners are the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC), South Hills Interfaith Movement (SHIM), Northern Area Multi-Service Center (NAMSC), the Latino Family Center of the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU), and Casa San Jose of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden. ISAC began operating on Jan. 1, 2014

In a report issued in January 2016, following a year and a half of operation, ISAC showed that its partner agencies had served about 1,700 people with navigation – short-term solutions in the form of information, assistance and referrals (IARs) – or service coordination – support for people in need of resources to address complex or long-term issues that require development of a service plan.

Data showed that service coordination significantly improved the lives of those who sought it. Client needs are ranked on a 5-point scale with ratings labeled "in crisis (1)"; "fragile (2)"; "vulnerable (3)"; "safe (4)" and "stable (5)." Assessments showed that clients moved an average of 2.2 points on the scale, meaning their circumstances improved, as an example, from "In crisis" to "safe" or "fragile" to "stable." Domains in which most improvement occurred were family and community, financial and legal.

Barbara Murock, Immigrants and Internationals Initiative Manager, said a particular strength of the collaborative is its use of a shared information system. ISAC uses software that helps prevent duplication of services.



HOW TO REACH ISAC

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Barb also noted that ISAC utilizes staff who are bilingual. ISAC, however, is not able to offer interpretation services for other providers, such as during appointments with medical personnel, to whom immigrants are connected.

ISAC also conducts community education and, with a grant from Staunton Farm Foundation, conducted trainings for service providers who desired more information on how to serve the behavioral health needs of immigrants and refugees.

It also has extended its reach by offering office hours in five county neighborhoods, serving eight language groups with bilingual navigators at churches, community centers or housing plans. "ISAC is a resource in the community for both immigrants who need help and service providers," Barb said.

"We want people to think ISAC when it comes to immigrants needing assistance in the county," added Leslie Aizenman, Director of Refugee and Immigrant Services at Jewish Family & Children's Service. She noted that ISAC's services are strengths-based, assisting clients in developing and tapping natural supports so that they can eventually navigate human service systems on their own or with the help of family or friends.

Brenda Green, ISAC Program Manager, said a notable accomplishment of ISAC is that it is able to keep issues from escalating in the lives of immigrants and refugees. She used, as an example, a landlord who called to say that a tenant was behind on rent but she didn't want to evict the person.

"The money was there. The person needed help with writing checks so a bilingual navigator assisted. Because we were able to assist them, this didn't get to a crisis situation," Brenda said.

ISAC has helped ameliorate cultural misunderstandings as well. For example, ISAC has referred clients to parenting classes to help them understand how people in the United States are expected to care for children. A person coming from a culture where child care is communal may not understand that leaving a child alone with the expectation a neighbor will help if needed is not an accepted common American practice.

Brenda emphasized that there are no language requirements for ISAC services and that there is no problem too small or too large for ISAC to address: Small problems left unaddressed can escalate into large ones. "Our system is a voicemail system and we say that we will get back to you in 48 hours. But the reality is we often get to you the same day. There is not a waiting list," she said.

ISAC facts

- In its first full year of operation, ISAC served about 1,700 clients
- A total of 55 languages were represented among clients
- Of those, 38 percent were Bhutanese and spoke Nepali
- 28 percent came from Spanish-speaking countries
- 25 percent of clients were under age 25 and 5 percent were over age 65