

# **Community Perspectives: Ideas for Improving Immigrant and Refugee Access to Human Services in East King County**

**A research report produced by the Eastside Refugee and Immigrant Coalition and  
The Eastside Human Services Forum  
September 2005**

## **Introduction**

During the spring of 2005, the Eastside Refugee and Immigrant Coalition (ERIC), working with the Eastside Human Services Forum (EHSF), agreed to undertake a research project for the purpose of (1) understanding how best to ensure equitable, culturally competent, cost-effective access to services for immigrants and refugees; (2) identifying creative ideas that utilize existing programs, people time, facilities; and (3) generating new ideas that might attract new resources to our community.

A consultant was hired and a planning committee was established and charged with overseeing the research project. The committee met five times over four months. After defining the questions to answer and the appropriate informants, a series of focus groups, meetings, and individual interviews took place over the months of April, May, and June. Many planning committee members and others took charge of facilitating, moderating, note taking, or summarizing the groups, as well as interpreting for immigrant and refugee clients. Their efforts were significant and much appreciated.

Key informants for this research included:

- Community Leaders and Providers representing a variety of agencies, public health facilities, hospitals, the faith community, the EHSF Board of Directors, and the Eastside Human Services Alliance
- Educators – ESL teachers, principals, counselors, Family Connection Centers staff, and School Board Members
- Funders – municipal, private, and United Way
- Immigrant and Refugee Clients – Eastern European, Asian, and Latino teens, adults, and seniors

Once all research was completed, the Planning Committee met to review findings and develop recommendations.

Section 1 of this report identifies what we learned about the challenges facing the Eastside; Section 2 identifies approaches and ideas that key informants believe can make a difference; Section 3 outlines the Planning Committee's criteria for successful solutions; Section 4 describes three ideas that show promise; and Section 5 proposes next steps. Additional background information appears in the appendices.

Although we know that resources are limited, we believe these findings will assist the community in several ways. We hope this report will generate additional conversations about how to incorporate strategic and innovative ideas in provider agencies, educational settings, the business sector, with funders, and throughout our community. There is tremendous potential for new and stronger partnerships, greater collaboration, and more creative approaches to funding that ensures immigrant and refugee access to services.

## Section 1 – The Challenges

### **Communication**

From some counts, more than 55 languages are spoken on the Eastside, with new immigrants arriving in waves from different parts of the world. Language differences affect every kind of communication (spoken, written, in-person, by phone) and are the most serious impediment to learning about and fully participating in society.

In addition to language, cultural differences pose a significant challenge. Without awareness and understanding of a culture's values and norms, it is difficult to communicate effectively and easy to misunderstand or make inaccurate assumptions about actions and intentions. This affects providers, educators, hospitals, and clients, all of whom are trying to be active and contributing members of the community.

Although dedicated, skilled interpreters are available in parts of the County, their numbers are insufficient to meet demand, the cost is high, and it is impractical to expect that those speaking a certain language will be available whenever and wherever they are needed. The sheer geography of the Eastside requires interpreters to travel far and wide, often without compensation for travel time. Whether in a school or agency setting, once an interpreter is identified as a helpful person, he or she is seen as a link – sometimes THE link – to mainstream society. The role of interpreters is far broader than it appears, and because they can understand and interpret language *and* culture, clients rely on them to facilitate communication of all kinds.

### **Understanding and Accessing the System**

Whether in matters of education, health, housing, or safety, there is a need to understand how the systems work and how to access services. Many common concepts (e.g., HMO, or Health Maintenance Organization) are foreign to immigrants and refugees, who have no frame of reference for understanding how to utilize such a system.

### **Transportation**

Our public transportation system can be difficult to understand, and language challenges make it common for people to board the wrong buses and end up lost. Once lost, it can take hours to turn things around, and even if a traveler finds himself eventually at his intended destination, it is not uncommon to have missed his appointment time and be required to reschedule. Although Metro has translated materials and created a video in different languages, immigrants often don't know that these resources exist or how to obtain them.

### **Immigration Status**

Many undocumented immigrants and refugees (as well as others who are not yet citizens) do not seek services because they are reluctant to enter buildings perceived as government-affiliated buildings for fear of deportation. They do not understand immigration law, and they often have no health insurance, no bank account, no form of identification, and no Social Security number. Without these resources, they have trouble finding, qualifying for or receiving the assistance they need.

### **Changing Family Dynamics**

As one person explained, “I have been to many parenting classes that have provided me with good parenting skills, but they have not addressed my struggles as an immigrant parent.” Immigrant and refugee families face unique challenges, in that children often find themselves interpreting the society, school policies and expectations for their parents, while they are trying to adapt to a new life in their own right. For parents, this reversal of the family power dynamic poses its own challenges. In addition, these dynamics affect our school system and educators who must teach a demanding curriculum while working to ensure that students and families feel welcome, understood, and that their basic needs are met.

### **Overlooked Resources within the Immigrant and Refugee Community**

Informal networks already exist in some immigrant and refugee communities whereby people help each other to settle in and establish roots on the Eastside. These are well-organized, personal approaches that provide early emergency help and mentoring to enable immigrants to learn how to meet basic needs, navigate the school system, and access needed human services.

Many immigrants and refugees who are now struggling in the United States are educated people who were wealthy professionals in their own countries. They have knowledge, skills, and abilities that can be utilized. Both adults and young people are interested in participating in their own communities and in society to a greater degree.

### **Funder Expectations and Challenges**

Shrinking county, state, and federal resources continue to pressure human services funders to do more with less. Municipal funders believe it is their job to ensure a stable infrastructure on the Eastside, and they are reluctant to cut existing, successful services even though they recognize the need for services specifically addressing immigrant and refugee needs. Most funders report increased numbers of funding requests from agencies serving immigrants and refugees, but because new and emerging organizations don't have the track record to validate organizational competence, they don't receive funding to develop innovative programs that might make a difference. In addition, funders have a set of expectations for applications, programs, and positive outcomes that may not be culturally competent. Because of this, some of the specialized funding requests may not qualify given the current funding guidelines.

### **Legal Considerations**

The fact that our Eastside communities currently have limited capacity to serve immigrants and refugees may have legal implications: while we cannot offer special privileges to any particular population, there is a simultaneous requirement that we provide equal access to services for all people.

## Section 2 – Making a Difference

Many we spoke with offered approaches and ideas that have the potential to effectively address the challenges described above. We have attempted to show those most likely to be involved in implementing these ideas. These include Educators, Providers, Community, Business, and Funders. We have also indicated the ideas that are most likely to cost money (\$) to implement.

### Utilize Known Cultural Competency Standards

▪ Hire staff from diverse backgrounds who reflect the populations being served	E	P			F	
▪ As staff leave, replace them with bilingual/bicultural staff	E	P			F	
▪ Offer a variety of printed materials in different languages	E	P				
▪ Use signage in lobbies in different languages		P				\$

### Further Develop Language Capacity and Cultural Competency

▪ Create an affordable Eastside language line and/or seek funds to expand use of existing language line, so that Eastside agencies can access an interpreter, even when services aren't available on-site	E	P				\$
▪ Contract with bicultural and bilingual counselors to help agencies meet clients' needs without having to refer them elsewhere		P				\$
▪ Offer emergency ESL classes for newcomers that just cover the basics	E	P	C			\$

### Build Community and Connection

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Understand and practice culturally competent service delivery models. For example:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Work with naturally occurring gatherings and take advantage of social opportunities</li> <li>▪ Combine educational opportunities with something fun that includes food</li> <li>▪ Invite kids to attend community events and their parents will come too</li> <li>▪ Work toward overcoming loneliness and isolation of immigrants and refugees</li> <li>▪ Try to develop one-to-one ongoing relationships between providers and clients</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	E	P	C			
▪ Build on the Hopelink model of focusing on a family and every barrier they have		P				\$
▪ Utilize <i>Helpful Connections</i> to demonstrate the range of services available.	E	P	C		F	

### Recognize People Within Immigrant and Refugee Populations as Resources

▪ Create paying jobs for immigrants and refugees that utilize their skills, such as interpreters, educators, outreach coordinators, and family support workers		P	C	B		\$
▪ Seek opportunities through teen community service requirements to involve them in helping others in their communities to connect with services and activities	E	P	C			
▪ Develop a master list of trained volunteers, the languages they speak, and the help they can offer.		P				\$
▪ Utilize adults and teens within the immigrant and refugee communities to orient, assist, and interpret for others within their community	E	P	C			
▪ Find a way to identify and then coordinate multi-lingual advocates who can help immigrants and refugees navigate services and systems.		P	C			\$
▪ Develop a community improvement program (similar to the Works Progress Administration) that focuses on immigrants and refugees, encouraging people to work together to make a difference			C		F	\$

### Create Learning Opportunities

▪ Access specialized training to correspond with waves of immigrants from specific countries		P				\$
▪ Offer family learning opportunities (e.g., evening classes at Family Connection Centers, family ESL classes, parenting classes specific to the challenges faced by immigrant parents)	E	P				\$
▪ Learn about organizations that serve specific immigrant populations and the languages they speak		P	C			
▪ Help funders understand what it takes to provide culturally competent services for immigrants and refugees					F	
▪ Find ways to modify system requirements so that paraprofessionals are authorized to provide the kind of assistance that acknowledges and utilizes their expertise, even if they lack an advanced degree.	E	P	C		F	
▪ Consider creative programs that provide economic assistance for higher education for immigrants and refugees in exchange for a commitment to work for a certain period of time to help communities in need.	E	P	C	B	F	\$
▪ ERIC's cultural competence assessment tool may be helpful.	E	P			F	

### Focus on New Funding Models

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider developing a combined Eastside funding pool focused on providing culturally competent services for immigrants and refugees</li> </ul>					F	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pilot and evaluate an experimental project designed to meet immigrant and refugee needs</li> </ul>	E	P	C	B	F	\$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revisit application processes, funding criteria, outcomes, and methods of evaluating success to ensure that they are culturally competent.</li> </ul>					F	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize that serving immigrants and refugees requires a different kind of effort and that not all results are apparent or measurable in traditional ways.</li> </ul>		P			F	

### Offer Services in New Places

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer services in convenient locations that are accessible by public transportation (e.g., at Senior Centers, schools, churches, libraries, and at other places people are familiar with)</li> </ul>	E	P	C			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer more flexible hours and scheduling to accommodate walk-ins (including evenings and weekends)</li> </ul>		P				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create satellite offices on the Eastside for particularly effective Seattle-based or other organizations</li> </ul>		P				\$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide child care when offering programs</li> </ul>		P				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a formal agreement between cities and school districts to ensure that school facilities are available to outside groups (e.g., Kirkland and Lake Washington School District have such an agreement). Use school facilities for after school and after hours programs and services, and use school communication methods to reach parents and teens to let them know about services offered.</li> </ul>	E	P			F	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-service family resource center in a house or other comfortable place, where adults and children can be inside and outside</li> </ul>	E	P	C	B	F	\$
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hold ESL classes closer to the neighborhoods where people live (e.g., Boys &amp; Girls Clubs, community centers, public schools)</li> </ul>	E	P	C			\$

### Streamline Paperwork

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a master application for funding so that agencies can apply once to multiple funders</li> </ul>					F	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create one form per client for all agencies to use that clients can copy and hand out to different agencies to save time and the difficulty of repeatedly filling out forms for every service.</li> </ul>		P				

### **Section 3 – Criteria for Successful Solutions**

The Planning Committee developed 12 key criteria that it believes must be taken into consideration if we are to meet the challenge of providing equitable, culturally competent, cost-effective services to immigrants and refugees on the Eastside. These criteria are as follows:

1. Address language needs and cultural issues to ensure greater capacity both for interpreting languages and for helping immigrants and refugees learn to speak English as soon as possible.
2. Help clients learn to navigate the human services systems so that they understand what services are available, how to access them, and where they can get help to meet their specific needs.
3. Encourage natural leaders within the community of immigrant and refugee populations as resources to help their communities and the society as a whole.
4. Build community among immigrant and refugee populations, recognizing the potential mutual benefit for all parts of the society.
5. Set realistic expectations for achieving cultural competence.
6. Utilize existing programs, facilities, and resources to the greatest extent possible.
7. Recognize that needs and barriers are different for documented and undocumented immigrants and refugees.
8. Ensure collaboration when appropriate and feasible, recognizing that collaboration has its own costs and challenges.
9. Acknowledge and address transportation issues so that services are as accessible as possible.
10. Focus on cost-effective solutions that are sustainable over time.
11. Provide appropriate learning opportunities to enhance skills and understanding in an ongoing way.
12. Ensure that pilot projects or new approaches can be evaluated for effectiveness.

## Section 4 – A Few Overarching Ideas

In addition to the many ideas identified in Section 2, the ERIC Planning Committee has identified three proposals that it believes have the greatest potential to meet the criteria above:

### **An Eastside Refugee and Immigrant Family Support Center.**

Pilot this concept at a convenient Eastside location (e.g., at Crossroads Mall, Redmond Community Center, Kirkland Community Center) that houses cultural "brokers" who provide multi-lingual, multi-cultural referral information, reference materials, and family support services. House the center in a known, central location that can be accessed without the stigma of being part of an agency. A schedule of services would be established, people would be able to visit anonymously to get the help they need, and schools and human service providers would be able to access information by telephone, internet, or in person. The Center would be staffed by a full-time Coordinator and specific language support on a rotating, but predictable schedule.

### **Cultural Broker Pilot Program.**

Develop a certification process for cultural brokers (as is being developed in South King County) and set the program up within six months with a focus on three or four main languages. Operating as a concierge for clients and a resource for providers, its focus would be to provide referrals and then follow-up with a feedback loop to be sure that referrals were effective and to identify any system glitches. Services would not be provided on site, but there would be a place to gather, space for smaller meetings, and offices (similar to Hopelink or Family Resource Center). It would have the feel of a community center.

Layers of help would be provided over time with different levels of assistance piloted and evaluated for effectiveness. At a minimum, there would be multi-lingual, multi-cultural information and referral assistance for clients and providers. Any additional services would be added if resources allowed.

### **Cultural Brokers linked with School Districts.**

Provide a pool of cultural brokers who are language and culturally competent to serve immigrants and refugees affiliated with schools.

## Section 5 – Proposed Next Steps

This report is a first step toward identifying ideas for ensuring equitable, culturally competent, cost-effective access to services for immigrants and refugees. We have attempted to identify creative ideas that utilize existing programs, people, time, and facilities. We have also generated new ideas that might attract new resources to our community.

The ERIC Planning Committee has identified three next steps:

- Create a Sounding Board representing a range of stakeholders to review this report and provide input about priorities.
- Share the research results and Sounding Board input via presentations (perhaps a road show) to a variety of forums – e.g., the Eastside Human Services Forum (EHSF) (including its Annual Meeting and its Human Services 102 event), the Eastside Refugee and Immigrant Coalition (ERIC) membership, the Eastside Human Services Alliance (EHSA), City Councils, Human Service Commissions, and United Way East Community Council.
- Find a home for moving forward and working together to implement recommendations.

## **Appendix**

### **ERIC Planning Committee Roster**

Alaric Bien	Chinese Information and Service Center
Kelly Burns	Youth Eastside Services
Joan Campbell	Friends of Youth
Sharon Carlsen	ERIC Consultant
Fred Cogswell	Bellevue Public Schools
Elaine Cummins	Seattle and King County Public Health
Carrie Hite	EHSF, ERIC Co-Chair, City of Kirkland
Sonya Figaredo-Alberts	Lake Washington School District
Colleen Kelly	City of Redmond
Deborah Lacy	ERIC Co-Chair
Paulina Lopez	Seattle Red Cross
Judy Manchester	City of Kirkland
Carla Miranda	City of Bellevue
Margaret Moore	United Way East Council
Shelley Noble	Hopelink
Jim Ott	King County Children and Family Commission
Elizabeth Westburg	YWCA
Junko Yamazaki	Asian Counseling Referral Services
Lynn Yilmaz	City of Bellevue Human Services Commission