

**Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs:**  
**Creative Community Engagement Process Final Report**

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**Introduction**

The OIRA Community Engagement Process was designed to prepare and nurture emerging leaders within Albuquerque's immigrant and refugee communities, honoring their previous contributions and providing further training for the facilitation of community engagement programming. The process also sought to help deepen OIRA understanding of these communities, to assess the challenges they face, and to develop community-driven solutions. Refugee and immigrant groups were encouraged to candidly share their stories and experiences, shaping a more robust picture of the 1) Story of Self, 2) Story of Us, and 3) Story of Now. The Community Engagement Process endeavored to respect and utilize the input, skills, and perspectives of community members in order to formulate actionable recommendations with which OIRA and the City of Albuquerque can better serve its immigrant and refugee families. The process also resulted in the production of six audio/visual stories to be shared on a variety of media, outreach, and communication platforms.

**Goals**

The OIRA Community Engagement Process was structured around the following goals:

**Goal #1 Story of Self**

- Encourage immigrant and refugee communities to share their stories and experiences before arriving to Albuquerque.
- Collect the story of self based on the following questions:
  - What are the reasons you immigrated or resettled in New Mexico?
  - How did you come to New Mexico?

**Goal #2 Story of Us**

- Invite immigrant and refugee communities to identify their common values and shared experiences in order to develop a collective story of dignity and justice.
  - What have been some of the challenges that you have faced in New Mexico as an undocumented immigrant/refugee?
  - What are the fears that you experience in New Mexico as an undocumented immigrant/refugee?

- What are the hopes that you experience in New Mexico as an undocumented immigrant/refugee?

### Goal #3 Story of Now

- Involve the immigrant and refugee communities in creating community solutions, strategy, and action items.
  - What are the community solutions that you have previously used to address the challenges faced as an immigrant/refugee?
  - What are the asks that you have for your public representatives and the city institutions in order to help address these challenges?

### Process

1. In order to effectively engage immigrant and refugee communities, the OIRA Steering Committee first identified community leaders for participation in the Creative Community Engagement Cohort. Community-based organizations in partnership with OIRA-SC also assisted in distinguishing and contacting these individuals. Members of the Creative Community Engagement Cohort were selected through a competitive process based on applicants' demonstrated work in their respective communities.
2. The Creative Community Engagement Fellows received training on how to facilitate community engagement programming using the Public Narrative Approach. They learned strategies and best practices for inviting others in their communities to share and to document stories of self, us, and now. The training was delivered by The Creative Coordinator and Lead Facilitator and the Artist Team.
3. Fellows developed individualized and/or collaborative community engagement plans and executed said plans over a period of five months. Fellows received a stipend for their work as well as logistical, interpretive, and childcare support services where necessary. For community engagement events, the participants were also provided with food, childcare, and interpretation.
4. The Creative Coordinator and Lead Facilitator and the Artist Team hired media and arts support to help document and disseminate the narratives of immigrants and refugees. Generation Justice was hired to produce six photo/audio stories.
5. The process concluded with the storytelling gathering "Making Albuquerque Home," which celebrated Albuquerque's immigrant and refugee communities. This culminating event took place on August 20<sup>th</sup> at the University of New Mexico Continuing Education Building Auditorium, and 150+ people were in attendance. The evening began with an informal meal of

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homemade dishes from around the world, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Mexico, and Iraq. Next, Generation Justice highlighted three stories gathered during the community engagement process. (Three audio/photo stories remain in production with Generation Justice at the writing of this report.) Next, the crowd broke up into small groups and talked with one another about a time when they felt at home in Albuquerque and what helps them feel at home. The event concluded with a resource fair for refugee/immigrant services and included representatives from: NM Dream Team, Congresswoman Michelle Lujan Grisham's office, the Family Independence Initiative, NM Immigrant Law Center, and the NM Alliance for School-based Healthcare.

### **Creative Community Engagement Fellows**

The creative community engagement cohort develops and honors the leadership of the following eleven individuals from immigrant or refugee communities. The fellows were motivated to participate for a variety of reasons, including a desire to change lives, help communities, create opportunities, craft the narrative, and build a network.

- Anai Hernandez - immigrant from Mexico
- Babsy Sinandile, U.S. - daughter of South African immigrants
- Jaén Ugalde - immigrant from Mexico
- Kaleka Lukusa - refugee from Democratic Republic of Congo
- Lan Sena, U.S. - daughter of Vietnamese refugees
- Mahbooba Pannah - immigrant from Afghanistan
- Martin Ndayisenga - refugee from Burundi
- Michelle Murguia - immigrant from Mexico
- Mohammed Alkwaz - refugee from Iraq
- Sara Diva - refugee from Afghanistan
- Viviana Yoshuri Martinez - immigrant from Mexico

*Note: All members of the cohort from Mexico were brought to the U.S. as young children.*

## **Organizational Partners**

- Encuentro
- Catholic Charities
- El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos
- United We Dream
- UNM Health Sciences Center Pathways Program
- UNM Refugee Well-being Project
- New Mexico Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice
- Immigrant and Refugee Resource Village of Albuquerque
- New Mexico Asian Family Center
- Global 505
- Generation Justice

## **Communities**

The OIRA Community Engagement Process reached out to members of the Mexican immigrant community; East African refugee community; Vietnamese refugee community; and the Iraqi, Afghani, Syrian communities. Extensive human capital resources remain untapped in all of these communities. A few examples include:

- Many Congolese women are skilled hairdressers, only limited in monetizing this skills by the red tape and start-up expenses to achieving official certification/qualification.
- One of Albuquerque's Iraqi immigrants is currently employed at Walmart. With the right training and resources, this individual could return to practicing medicine and make a marked contribution to society.
- In planning one community engagement session, the Mexican immigrant community coordinated to provide the necessary supplies for the event and arranged a fun diversion for the community children.

This report asks how we can best make use of the individual talents, collective knowledge, and resources already available within our immigrant/refugee communities. Feedback and suggestions from these communities is integrated into the following challenges and recommendations.

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## **Challenges**

### **Language/Interpretive Services**

- Language barriers remain a significant challenge for all refugee/immigrant communities, primarily in the degree to which they amplify all other challenges. Access to interpretive services is piecemeal and unreliable. Furthermore, the quality and effectiveness of ESL classes vary drastically between schools and institutions.
  - “We need a real instructor who can help and teach us with the English language, not what Lutheran Family Services provides; it’s not professional at all.”
  - “We need longer ESL classes, because there is not enough time to absorb the information.”
- Members of the immigrant/refugee communities also report extensive communication difficulties with Lutheran Family Services and other service agencies.
  - “Refugees are struggling to contact their refugee case managers for their daily life problems. Refugees leave messages to their RCMs, but they are not getting calls back.”
  - “Lutheran does not help us to be informed about what is going on in this country. We feel like we are abandoned to ourselves; we do not know from where to start. We need a framework where we can exchange information.”

### **Education/Enrollment**

- Families report minimal guidance for enrolling children in local schools, especially children age 17 or older. Most (if not all) teenagers/young adults 18 or older who desire an education have been told they are not permitted to enroll in school due to their age. They are told they need to find work instead. These teenagers/young adults and their families are not informed of night school or alternative options available for their education.
  - “We came with my brother. Started to apply for jobs for us, and when he was asking about going to school, they refused. We were forced to go to work. They said we need to start a job because the benefit was going to end. He asked for assistance to register for school, but they [Lutheran Family Services] told him he needed to work.”
  - “It’s important to get financial assistance, but education is best. It would be too hard to get a job if you don’t have education.”
- Refugees and undocumented immigrants pursuing coursework at UNM and CNM are sometimes told they are unable to enroll as a New Mexico resident due to their documentation status. This is contrary to the official policy permitting enrollment regardless of status.
  - “I have applied for financial aid. I was accepted, and then I registered for classes. When I registered for classes, they listed me as a non-

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- resident so they doubled the registration fees, and I cannot pay this amount.”
- There is also a need for specialized classes for those individuals who were unable to complete their education in their home countries and thus are not yet literate (in any language).

### **Employment/Job Assistance**

- Immigrants and refugees continue to struggle to find steady and sufficient employment. They do not have access to or are unable to benefit from existing job assistance programs and desire something more applicable to refugee/immigrant circumstances.
  - “They could make things easier by establishing a hiring office, especially for refugees, so they could help them find jobs. This could be so effective.”
- Immigrant/refugee applicants struggle to effectively market their skills and experiences and/or prove their educational backgrounds.
  - “I ran away from my country. When I left my house under bombing of aircraft, there was a war. I left everything. I did not bring my clothes or transcripts. Most of the government departments were closed because of the war, and it is hard for me to get my transcripts.”
- In some cases, applicants do not have enough skills and experience to find work; they require job training opportunities.
  - “Another difficulty is finding a job. I am applying for jobs, and no one is hiring me because I do not have any experience.”

### **Ability to Apply Skills/Job Experience from Home Country**

- Many employers do not accept degrees or certifications from home countries, forcing immigrants/refugees to start over in their chosen professions. This is demoralizing, time-consuming, and expensive.
  - “We need help so we can continue working with our job skills. Not these types of jobs they’re giving us.”
  - “They can solve the work problem by establishing a hiring office that can at least hire educated people. My wife is one of those people; she has a law degree. We tried to evaluate it, but the evaluation process could take over two years.”
- Immigrants/refugees applying for jobs often do not have the necessary references/recommendations or credentials to secure a position.
  - “If you do not have experience in the same country, you have to find someone to recommend you. Here in America and everywhere else, if you do not have someone to recommend you, no one will hire you.”

### **Transportation**

- While some immigrants/refugees are granted a driver’s license, they do not often receive instruction on driving or on local traffic rules, endangering their lives and the lives of others. It is also rare that any instruction provided

is in an immigrant/refugee's own language. Members of these communities also struggle to navigate Albuquerque's unreliable and ineffective bus system.

### Health/Medical Support

- Many refugees and immigrants arrive with or develop health issues and are unable to access the necessary treatment.
  - "Another problem is that we came in a medical file; my husband has surgeries, and I am sick. We both are not able to work, so we are worried how we can pay the rent."
  - "I'm sick. I've been sick; I have stroke and high blood pressure. This is my third year that I am suffering. My left leg is swollen from the stroke. I have no help. They cut my cash assistance."
- The inability to communicate plays a big role in health-related challenges, especially when it comes to coping with trauma, exploring mental health services, or accessing emergency services.
  - "When someone is sick, he or she cannot be seen without an appointment unless in an emergency state, but sickness has no time. They tell you to go back home with pain due to lack of appointment."
- Some refugees are engaged in labor that strains their physical abilities.
  - "The types of jobs we do are very hard, heavy (lifting), and require a lot of hard work."
- Some parents are unable to work on account of their children's health conditions, further impoverishing the family.
  - "I have a child who had a heart operation. He will be turning 5 years this month, but he will have another operation/surgery... He takes meds every day. For that reason, I can't work. I have to stay and take care of him at home. I asked for his social security/disability for support, but they have denied my request."

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### Minimum Wage/Cash Assistance

- Even when employed, many immigrant and refugee families still struggle to make ends meet. Income from a full-time minimum wage job is not enough to sustain the average family, and many families report spending at least 80% or more of their income on rent alone.
  - "They say in America there is enough food, but we are hungry. You're working and you get a check for \$300. That goes to pay rent, to pay insurance or your phone bill."
- Employers are not scheduling immigrant/refugee employees enough hours to make ends meet.
- Many participants in community engagement sessions specifically discussed their inability to afford hygiene products, which has negatively impacted their social interactions and how they are treated by people around them. Children report being made fun of at school.

- “They keep saying we're dirty, but they never gave or supported us with any hygiene products. We have big families and don't have enough money to keep us with laundry soap, coins to pay for laundry machine, body soap, lotion soap, and other basic daily needs.”

### **Housing**

- Immigrant and refugee families struggle to find suitable, fair, and affordable housing. They also report being turned away due to poor credit scores.
  - “Housing is the main problem, because if you make any mistakes it will affect your credit history. Because when you rent a new place and you have a bad credit, it will be hard to be accepted.”
- Some immigrants and refugees have experienced mistreatment and have been taken advantage of due to their lack of literacy/English, education, and information. Many do not know their rights as tenants and are unaware of their legal options to report mistreatment.
  - “A nuclear family of six reported not understanding how or why there are lots of penalties charged to their rent right after they stop receiving rent assistance from the government.”
  - “Most (if not all) families have discovered that the case manager and the rent/appointment manager make a deal of additional fake charges to the rent.”
- Some immigrants/refugees report that Lutheran Family Services does not properly communicate the terms of their lease or the details of their housing situations.
  - “Lutheran makes the refugees sign the agreement without explaining it to them so they can understand the content of the contract. We need somebody who can help us understand how to deal with the issue.”

### **Prejudiced Treatment**

- Refugees/immigrants experience mistreatment due to cultural and racial biases. Some report neighbors calling the cops unnecessarily and being harassed and denigrated in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods.
  - “Our kids are being accused of wrongdoing. We've been accused. The neighbors mistreat us. We paid \$400 to resolve a dispute about a car, something that my children did not commit.”
  - “The neighbors say that our food smells. They cough and spit right next to us eating with our kids outside.”
  - “As a teacher I have had students ask me where I'm from, even though I was born here in the United States... I was told by a colleague that I was never going to do well because English was not my first language.”

### **Cultural Adjustment**

- New arrivals receive little to no guidance on navigating American and New Mexican cultural norms. They receive no support for communicating or



holding fast to their religious and social practices here in the U.S. For example, the roles of men and women are radically different here than in many immigrant/refugee home countries. Some women report discomfort with the expectation of handshakes/touching men in a employment or social context.

- “I go through many embarrassing situations. One of those situations is hand shakings. We are not used to handshakes between men and women, but it is okay in the American culture. In my culture, I cannot shake their hands back or even touch men.”
- “You try to say that you need food assistance, and they say they will take you to a place. But you find out it’s a different kind of food that you wouldn’t eat... In Africa we are able to eat ugali, meat, and different vegetables. These kinds of food in cans, we can’t eat.”
- “Your kids have to be in school on Fridays, so they cannot attend the Friday prayer.”

#### **Timeline/Consistency of Assistance**

- The formal resettlement assistance provided to incoming refugees is inconsistent and the regulations are sometimes confusing to understand. Many refugees report having their benefits taken away without warning after beginning employment. Refugee families anticipate receiving six months of assistance, and this is jolting to them when this promise changes suddenly.
  - “Once you start working, you don’t get assistance anymore.”
  - “They said that we’d get support for six months... I only had my son (20) [with me]. We stayed one month. He started a job. They said they would pay rent for us only two months. I cried and said if I knew English, I could go over there and tell them what they’re doing to me.”

#### **Recommendations/Opportunities**

##### **1. Continue to support the good work already taking place.**

- Bolster the efforts of existing community-based organizations working with immigrant and refugee communities.
- Provide opportunities for CBOs to communicate and collaborate with each other to tackle systemic problems and avoid gaps in services.

##### **2. Deepen existing partnerships and pursue new partnerships.**

- Form a partnership with the Family Independence Initiative.
  - The goal of FII is to change attitudes in large sectors of our society from believing that low-income families are takers or a drain on society to recognizing their creativity and contributions.
  - Families in FII use their collective voice to shift perceptions of their communities while fighting for their rights.
- Partner with Artful Life in its work with Global 505.

- Educate the Albuquerque public about immigrant/refugee affairs and needs.
  - Guide social, political, and economic spheres to ask: “What can my community do to help refugees feel more at home?”

### **3. Provide streamlined assistance.**

- Currently, the assistance immigrants/refugees receive is piecemeal and accessing services can require many steps and multiple offices. Help circumvent these complicated steps to receiving assistance through utilizing OIRA as a central office for answering immigrant/refugee questions and concerns and providing the necessary information, paperwork, contacts, and guidance to help them get what they need.

### **4. Improve and innovate access to interpretive services.**

- Support a community interpreters pilot program, modeled after Valley Community Interpreters (VCI) to both increase the number of interpreters available to the immigrant/refugee communities at-large and to provide interested individuals with an employment opportunity.
  - VCI Interpreter Training programs are focused on building a qualified interpreter workforce to work in medical, social services, and educational settings, three of the most essential realms for new arrivals to navigate. The course fast-tracks a certificate permitting graduates to become qualified interpreters and bringing them closer to achieving the national interpreter certification.
- Work with existing ESL programs to ensure quality learning is taking place. Where applicable, connect immigrants/refugees with CNM ESL courses.

### **5. Advocate for the consistent, non-negotiable receipt of six months of (equal) resettlement benefits after refugee arrival.**

- Explore possibilities to extend the length of this resettlement benefit.

### **6. Develop a job placement system relevant to applicants’ existing skills and previous experiences.**

- Serve as a hiring office specifically for immigrants and refugees.
- Examine the possibility of utilizing volunteer positions or internships to help immigrant/refugee applicants gain work experience.
- Work to provide job training in applicants’ own languages.

### **7. Provide organizational affiliation for immigrants/refugees.**

- Serve as references for immigrant/refugee job applicants.
- Counsel immigrants/refugees on how to pitch and exhibit their previous job and educational experiences on resumes and applications and during interviews.
- Help employers recognize and understand the skills refugee/immigrant applicants offer.

**8. Provide training for school counselors and administrators.**

- Ensure Albuquerque Public Schools are equipped with the necessary information and tools to enroll refugee/immigrant students, regardless of age or country of origin.

**9. Create opportunities for members of the immigrant/refugee communities to network, socialize, and get to know one another.**

- Remain cognizant of intersectionality, presenting safe and accessible spaces for immigrants and refugees to interact and solve problems together.

**10. Locate and promote accessible and safe gathering places.**

- Identify a gathering place/time that can be open and accessible for immigrant/refugee gatherings and meetings.
- Explore safe and affordable options for immigrant/refugee children in the after-school hours and during the summer breaks.
- Examine opening public places (community centers, school buildings, churches, etc.) for immigrant/refugee access.

**11. Sufficiently staff the OIRA office.**

- Employ immigrants and refugees (or first-generation Americans) to execute further community engagement efforts.
- Provide a point person or persons for refugees/immigrants to contact with their concerns.

**12. Make a case for the OIRA office in the greater Albuquerque community.**

- Network with mayoral candidates and city council members to boost general understanding of and support for OIRA efforts.
- Analyze how OIRA can also work with the county to provide more comprehensive support for all refugee/immigrant families.
- Consistently represent OIRA in relevant social, political, and community events.