Celebrating 10 years of Mental Healthcare Services

RefugeeOne

WELLNESS PROGRAM

Celebrating 10 years of Mental Healthcare Services
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Message from the Executive Director

RefugeeOne has been a leader in welcoming newcomers to Chicago since 1982. We are proud of our comprehensive and innovative programs to help those feeling war, terror, and persecution rebuild their lives with safety, dignity, and self-reliance. The addition of the Wellness Program in 2011 reflects our agency’s deep understanding that many of our arrivals have experienced trauma and tremendous loss in their journey to the United States. Through trauma-informed and culturally-aligned mental healthcare services delivered under one roof, RefugeeOne is ensuring that all our participants – refugee youth to older adults – have access to all the therapeutic services they need to live full, healthy, and productive lives.

I am grateful for the efforts of the Wellness Program staff over the last decade who have developed and operated a refugee mental health program that is recognized widely. The stories from past clients are a testimony that mental healthcare is both necessary and essential for helping individuals thrive, strengthening families, and invigorating communities. This 10-year report is a testimony to the incredible contributions the program has made to our agency and community.

I also want to thank each and every one of our funders and contributors, for sharing our vision and believing in our work. I look forward to celebrating the continued growth and success of RefugeeOne’s Wellness Program in the years to come.

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Executive Director

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Melineh Kano
Executive Director

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(*Leadership Roles as of January 2023)
RefugeeOne is the largest full-service resettlement agency in Chicago and has welcomed more than 20,000 refugees since 1982. The organization has served refugees from every major world crisis including Rwandans and Bosnians fleeing genocide, Jews from the former Soviet Union, Cambodian survivors of the killing fields, the Lost Boys of Sudan, Iranians forced out by the Islamic Revolution, and most recently, Afghans fleeing the Taliban.

Services have expanded in recent years to include supports to asylum-seekers, families of mixed or undocumented status, and unaccompanied children.

RefugeeOne provides holistic services designed to help refugees & immigrants advance self-reliance, strengthen families, and promote healing. This includes support for housing, English training, workforce development, job placement, youth services, & immigration services. The staff includes former refugees and immigrants with 37 languages represented, allowing the agency to seamlessly and effectively meet the diverse needs of the target population.
Regional conflicts, human rights violations, poverty, & climate change have been driving the movement of millions of people worldwide, young & old, who have directly experienced acute trauma and who seek to rebuild their lives in safety & dignity. For those arriving in the United States, inequitable access to trauma-informed, culturally & linguistically-responsive mental health services regrettably intensifies vulnerabilities from past trauma and directly impacts a newcomer’s ability to adjust, contribute, and thrive in a new country.

**Understanding the Need**

**MENTAL HEALTH IS A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE**

Forcibly displaced refugees and asylum-seekers are more likely to experience trauma and stress-related mental health problems that may directly influence health, social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. This includes higher rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders (Turrini, et al., 2017).

Research also shows that untreated mental health conditions bear a heavy cost to the individual and our society. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, untreated mental illness costs the United States $300 billion every year due to losses in productivity and associated costs due to absenteeism, employee turnover, and increases in medical and disability expenses (Gillison & Keller, 2021).

Untreated mental disorders for children cost taxpayers $247 billion annually in direct and indirect expenses for child, family, and community interventions (Avenevoli et al., 2013) across many systems including health systems, education systems, child welfare, the employment sector, and the criminal justice system.

**Other Risks**

Broadly speaking, untreated mental health conditions can result in increased risk of school failure, unnecessary disability, unemployment, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide, substance use, dependence on social services, and overall poor quality of life.

RefugeeOne’s Wellness Program offers a solution.
The RefugeeOne Wellness Program

RefugeeOne’s Wellness Program has been providing mental health and health coordination services since 2011 as part of core programming in the larger refugee resettlement agency. Only a handful of refugee resettlement programs under the U.S. Department of State Office of Refugee Resettlement operate an in-house mental health program so the RefugeeOne Wellness Program is a unique national model for refugee mental healthcare within the resettlement context.

Broadly, the program ensures that all arrivals – across the lifespan – with mental and physical healthcare needs will receive appropriate treatment, health education, and coordinated health management support to live long, healthy lives. The emphasis of the program is on preventative care and early intervention with clients whose symptoms indicate the possibility of long-term, debilitating conditions. The program recognizes that a significant number of refugees and asylum-seekers arriving from direct conflict can experience a range of issues including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, sleep and eating disorders, grief, substance use,
anger management, lack of self-care/hygiene, domestic violence, and educational, behavioral, and social-emotional needs among children and youth.

The resettlement process itself can trigger these issues as well. Thus, we also focus on wraparound adjustment supports – housing, case management, health coordination – to help relieve the cumulative stress, anxiety, and fear that comes with rebuilding a life in a new country.

The RefugeeOne Wellness Program is a local and national expert in refugee mental health with over a decade of experience operating a comprehensive mental health program to diverse global communities from Central & East Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. The program has a deep understanding of the impact of immigration trauma, how it manifests across cultures in behavioral, emotional & mental health disturbances, and culturally-responsive approaches to addressing mental health problems to prevent longer-term debilitating mental and/or physical health conditions. Young children to older adult refugees can access our diverse supportive services, including: individual/group therapy; home visiting for families with young children; support groups for LGBTQ populations, pregnant moms, or survivors of domestic violence; medical case management; and dental services.

It is data-driven, tracking mental health trends across arriving communities & studying the most effective evidence-based treatments that are applied in the program. Services are implemented using an interdisciplinary team of mental health professionals, psychiatrists, social workers, home visitors, outreach workers/interpreters, & a variety of volunteers specializing in nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy and dental care.

Our Goal

We build stronger, healthier communities when we address the complex mental health and health needs of trauma-experienced newcomers. Access to trauma-informed, culturally-sensitive, evidenced-based mental healthcare is essential to building healthy communities and a thriving society that will not bear the billion dollar costs associated with untreated mental conditions.

With certainty, arriving refugee and asylum-seekers will continue to need access to these services. To provide them is essential for building thriving communities, so that all forcibly displaced arrivals are not merely survivors of the atrocities in their home countries but contributing members of our communities here in the U.S.
RefugeeOne’s Wellness Program was founded in 2011 to support the mental well-being of refugees of all ages through trauma-informed, developmentally-appropriate, culturally and linguistically-responsive mental health and medical case management services.

Core Services

The program offers a range of services to promote health and mental well-being among newly arrived refugees and immigrants.

- **Universal Mental Health/Developmental Screening**
- **Clinical Services**
- **Health Coordination Services**

**ADULTS**
- Individual/Group therapy
- Psychiatric services

**CHILD/YOUTH (6-21)**
- Individual/Group therapy
- Social Emotional Learning group sessions for parents & youth

**EARLY CHILDHOOD (0-5)**
- Child-parent psychotherapy + Home Visiting

**Psycho-education + Training**

**Dental Care**

**Forensic Psychological Evaluations (Asylum-Seekers)**
5,137 adult and child records were included in the review project. This number reflects all arrivals who were resettled by RefugeeOne between 2011-2021. The average family size was 3.5 though some families were as large as 11 members.

New arrivals found housing in the following top five zip codes: 60077, 60625, 60626, 60645, 60659

75% of arrivals were Agency Assisted

Average age was 27 years upon arrival (N=5003)

Average time to be hired was 170 days, 5.7 Months (N=988)
Only a handful of refugee resettlement programs under the U.S. Department of State Office of Refugee Resettlement operate an in-house mental health program. RefugeeOne’s Wellness Program is a unique national model for refugee mental healthcare within the resettlement context.

Wellness Program:
General Overview

Enrollment Data

872 adults and children received clinical services between 2011-2021. This includes accessing psychiatric services, individual therapy, peer group therapy, child-parent psychotherapy, clinical services in shelters for unaccompanied children, and forensic psychological evaluations for asylum-seekers.

237 clients received psychiatric care.

198 families received trauma-informed home visiting using the Baby TALK Model.

872

198
The RefugeeOne Wellness Program is a local & national expert in refugee mental health with over a decade of experience operating a comprehensive mental health program to diverse global communities from Central & East Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, & Southeast Asia.
Adults are screened for mental health needs within 30-45 days from arrival so appropriate support can be provided early in the resettlement process.

Of 3,388 adult arrivals, 1,770 people were screened for mental health problems on our screening tool & 390 (25%) screened positive for need.

24% of the arriving population were enrolled in clinical services.

Many participants were enrolled within the first 6 months from arrival. This is a critical period when adjustment stress can activate past mental health problems, highlighting the importance of early access to mental healthcare services.
Top 5 Mental Health Needs for the Top 5 Countries Enrolled in Services

The Top Three Service Modalities

- Individual services: 72% (34 yrs average participant age)
- Psychiatric services: 30% (41 yrs average participant age)
- SEL Group: 15% (12 yrs average participant age)

Participation Length by Country of Origin

- AFGHAN: 297 days (9.9 mos)
- BURMESE: 234 days (7.8 mos)
- CONGOLESE: 276 days (9.2 mos)
- IRAQI: 587 days (19.6 mos)
- SYRIAN: 641 days (21.4 mos)

Forcibly displaced refugees and asylum-seekers are more likely to experience higher rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders (Turrini, et al., 2017[i]).
Adult Program

641 the total number of adults served

DAYS 462 15.4 MONTHS

Adult clients receiving psychiatric services for an average of

Primary Therapy Interventions

- Psycho-education 68%
- Solutions-focused Therapy 40%
- Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy 38%
- Narrative Therapy 28%

Top Mental Health Needs Among Enrolled Adults

- General Adjustment 33%
- Trauma & stress-related symptoms 34%
- Depression symptoms 11%
- Anxiety symptoms 7%

Before everything felt dark, now I feel like I know where I am going, I know what I am doing, and I can focus on my future goals. I couldn’t focus on my future before because all that happened to me kept me from being able to plan that far ahead. Now I have graduated with a CNA degree, I’ve finished my English classes, have my green card, and I’m going to be a nurse. I feel very excited about this!"

- Former Adult Client -

Dr. Karlene Goodman, M.D. provided in-house psychiatric services and mental health evaluations for disability & citizenship paperwork from 2011-2021.
231 the total number of youth served

Top Mental Health Needs Among Enrolled Children and Youth

![Pie chart showing the distribution of youth served by age group and mental health needs.](chart.png)

- **33%** Adjustment Problems
- **15%** Behavioral Needs in School
- **7%** Social-Emotional Delay
- **5%** Family Relationship Problems

- Early childhood: Age 0-4 years
- Middle School: Age 11-13 years
- Elementary School: Age 5-10 years
- High School: Age 14-19 years
Child/youth clients were enrolled in services for an average of

**DAYS 203**

**6.8 MONTHS**

Wellness Program was super beneficial to me. I was going through a lot mentally with senior year being virtual and COVID. Then I stumbled upon this program & it changed how I perceive myself. I learned to find healthy ways to cope with mental health along with find friends (virtually) and have that social interaction I needed during the pandemic. Not only that, I have became more self-aware cause of this program. I remember the first day we did an activity that associates parts of our body pain with specific stress and I’m utilizing that even now. Overall, this group helped me get through the pandemic in a way that kept me moving and engaged to the outside world. Thank you for letting me part of this group!

- Former Youth Client-

This is from a client who was in the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) group with a community partner, GirlForward for seniors transitioning from high school to college during the pandemic.
In order to become more knowledgeable with motherhood and parenting, I try my best to look for information and activities, but when I enrolled in the program, the home visitor brought all I needed to know ready to use and provided it on a plate of gold which also means how ready and valuable it is. Therefore I can see a difference in parenting outcome between my older child versus the younger child who was enrolled at the very beginning in the program in which we focused on parent-child activities rather than the older child who was enrolled later in the program. In comparison, for the younger child who was enrolled in the program since the beginning, I already see the growth in his development and speech ahead of where the other child was at this time.

- Home Visiting Client -

Targeted programming is provided for pregnant people and families with very young children age 0 to 5 years. Trauma-informed home visiting using the Baby TALK Model is offered to positively impact child development by nurturing responsive caregiver relationships and providing development resources. Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) is the program’s therapy model for supporting very young children who have experienced trauma and their caregivers.
Interventions were adapted to be culturally responsive. Utilization varied by home country reflecting the need to be attuned and responsive to engaging participants of diverse backgrounds and circumstances.

Participants generally showed improvements in level of engagement, emotional affect, rates of attendance, stability of symptoms, and overall improvement irrespective of presenting need, home country, gender, or age.
The RefugeeOne Wellness Program provides the necessary mental health supports to promote a smooth transition to American society.

“Historically, refugees acclimate well to their new lives in the United States. They are dedicated employees, start businesses at high rates, & are more likely than other groups to apply for citizenship, according to the American Immigration Council. But their odds of a smooth adjustment depend greatly on how we - as government, community, business leaders, & caring individuals - support them in their transition to become residents and eventually Americans.” – Spencer J. Cox, Governor of Utah - Fortune Magazine, 4/27/22
Reflections from RefugeeOne Staff

The young people resettled by RefugeeOne bring their own unique experiences, strengths, and personalities to Chicago, enhancing their communities and adding richness to the social fabric of their new home. As folks who are forcibly displaced, many also face significant challenges: trauma, poverty, isolation, and general challenges adjusting to a new environment.

The Wellness Program aims to support young people as they explore their evolving identities, grapple with internal and external pressures to excel academically, learn to attend to their own needs while also fulfilling familial responsibilities, and build and maintain healthy relationships.

- Youth Services Coordinator -

Being a part of RefugeeOne has been a privilege for me. I have felt like I have learned a great deal about relational & reflective practice and enjoy collaborating with others on our team or in the general resettlement program. Based on the supervision I get, I feel I am scaffolded to have meaningful relationships with clients that impact their growth. In addition, I feel I am able to pursue my interests such as doing forensic assessments for asylum seekers.

- Early Childhood Services Coordinator -

Interning at RefugeeOne opened the door to possibilities I couldn’t even imagine. The staff in Wellness Program saw where each of us excelled & gave us opportunities to push ourselves in these areas. In my time there, I was able to explore and grow skills in group therapy, early education, and research.

- Former Intern -
As my role as a home visitor, it's a great joy and very rewarding to see the parents learning, bonding and interacting in a positive way with their children. It's very fulfilling when equipping, empowering & educating a parent and a family in order to be able to promote and support their children’s development!

- Wellness Program Home Visitor -

Oftentimes the image of refugees and asylees brings up themes of trauma and pain, which can come to define what it means to be in their position. Although that is often part of the story, the folks we encounter in this work are incredibly strong and resilient. Redefining the title of “refugee” or “asylee” to be synonymous with that strength is a central hope for the program.

- Wellness Program Manager -

The Wellness Program has added a vital element to our resettlement work. The Employment team has certainly seen the benefit our participants get from the program where work is concerned. We’ve worked with candidates not quite ready for work/unable to follow through on appointments or interviews when they first arrive who have gone on to secure & maintain steady, permanent work in Chicago."

- Staff Member, RefugeeOne Employment Program -
Additional Program Innovations

- Prioritizing two-generation services to promote infant early childhood mental health (IECMH) and adult mental health
- Wellness Program YouTube Channel with content interpreted in 8 languages
- Original Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum for school-age and adolescent youth and parents
- Trauma-informed medical case management
- Establishment of a no-cost refugee dental clinic
- Research Partnerships
Partner Schools
Receiving Onsite Clinical Services

Sullivan High School
Theodore Roosevelt High School
Passages Elementary School
Armstrong Elementary
Kilmer Cougars

University Partners
for Academic Field Placements

The University of Chicago
Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice
Loyola University Chicago
School of Social Work
University of Illinois Chicago
Jane Addams College of Social Work
University of Illinois Chicago
College of Dentistry
DePaul University
Adler University
Erikson Institute
Health Partners

• Antillas Clinic, Mt. Sinai Hospital
• Apna Gar
• Connect Teen at Ann & Robert H. Lurie, Children’s Hospital of Chicago
• CEDA WIC Morton Grove
• EveryMom Chicago
• GirlForward
• Heartland Health Centers
• Karlene Goodman, M.D.
• Marjorie Kovler Center
• Northwestern University Traffic Safety Resource Center
• Rush University Medical Center (Child and Family Connections #11)
• Share Our Spare
• Smart Love Family Services

Resettlement Partners

• Bhutanese Community Association of Illinois
• Catholic Charities Chicago
• Ethiopian Community Association of Chicago
• FORA
• Heartland Alliance Refugee and Immigrant Community Services
• Iraqi Mutual Aid Association
• Jewish Child and Family Services
• Pan-African Association
• Muslim Woman’s Resource Center
• Rohingya Cultural Center
• Syrian Community Network
• World Relief Chicago

Education and Advocacy Partners

• Coalition for Immigrant Mental Health
• Illinois Refugee Mental Health Task Force (2015-2020)
• Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Refugee and Immigrant Subcommittee (2014-2020)
• Refugee Health Task Force
Program Funders

• The Albert Pick, Jr. Fund
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• The Blowitz-Ridgeway Foundation
• The Chicago Community Trust
• Chicago Foundation for Women
• City of Chicago, Department of Family Support Services
• Colonel Stanley R. McNeil Foundation, Bank of America, N.A., Trustee
• Elizabeth Morse Genius Charitable Trust
• The Field Foundation of Illinois
• Foundation for Health Enhancement
• G.A. Ackermann Memorial Fund, Bank of America, N.A., Trustee
• The Huang Min Charitable Fund
• Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation
• Impact 100 Chicago
• Interfaith America
• ISDS Foundation (Illinois State Dental Society)
• Michael Reese Health Trust
• North Shore Exchange
• The Polk Bros. Foundation
• Ravenswood Health Care Foundation
• Urban Institute
• VNA Foundation
• Walder Foundation
Wellness Program Workforce from 2011-2021

- Clinical & Support Staff: 10
- Home Visitors: 7
- Interpreters: 13
- Interns: 92

Citations


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