

TITLE: Arizona nonprofits boost aid to help refugees impacted by COVID-19 pandemic
By Sarandon Raboin | Luce Foundation Cronkite Fellowship

Refugees living in Arizona are struggling to navigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, non-profit organizations boosted assistance programs after they noticed more refugees losing their jobs or having their hours cut. Families are also struggling with navigating complicated government aid applications, in a language they may not have fluency of yet, they said.

There are currently 82,982 refugees in Arizona according to the latest numbers by the Arizona Department of Economic Security. Refugees make up less than one percent of the total population of Arizona.

But, many refugees work in the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, which makes it more challenging to make ends meet, according to Stanford Prescott, the community engagement coordinator for the International Rescue Committee. The group helps resettle refugees across the country, and has an office in Phoenix.

Organizations like the International Rescue Committee, Iranian American Society of Arizona and the Refugees and Immigrant Communities for Empowerment, or RICE, have stepped in to help bring crucial information and resources to refugee families in need.

“In the past few months, I would say roughly 1000 refugees coming in needed unemployment and assistance,” said Dominic Braham, the executive director of RICE, a non-profit based in Phoenix. Since they were established in 2017, they’ve focused on helping refugees and immigrants become economically self-sufficient.

“We are kind of the last hope for them, and don’t want to just turn them away, we want to find solutions,” said Braham.

Groups providing cash assistance to refugee families

One of the main ways that these organizations are helping is by giving small grants or loans, or even providing necessary care packages and resources to families.

“By April about 75% of the refugees that we’ve resettled in the past year or two, they had lost a job or suffered another loss of income. And so while many Americans and many Arizonans lost their jobs, the effect was almost an order of magnitude greater in the refugee community,” Prescott said.

The Iranian American Society for Arizona, based in Scottsdale, has helped 50 families with one-time \$250 grants or interest free loans up to \$1,200 for their rent or bills. The loans have to be paid back within one year, and the grants don’t have to be paid back at all.

Malie Malihi, the director of outreach programs at the Iranian American Society of Arizona, shared one story from a Somalian refugee that her organization helped who lost her car rental job because of COVID-19. The refugee asked to remain anonymous when she shared her story with Malihi.

“I have three children and had to put food on the table for them, I wasn’t able to pay my bills for two months. I was very worried,” the refugee wrote. “For the last three months, I went to the center a few times and picked up the groceries. They also paid \$250 for my utility bill.”

The International Rescue Committee has also assisted with getting basic necessities for refugee families. Since the beginning of the pandemic, they have helped approximately 2,250 people each month with COVID-19 related needs such as food care boxes, unemployment applications, and more.

"We did care packages, we provided food and toilet paper and all sorts of other things that they needed as basics, as well as some cash assistance to help with things like rent and utility," said Prescott.

But the financial troubles for refugee families may only be growing, since they are having to deplete their savings, if they have any, faster than they can replenish them, according to Malihi.

"What I see is just getting worse and worse because even if they had a little saving or they have some resources, they already used that. I see more people now need help to pay their utilities, to pay for their food, because they already used whatever they had," said Malihi.

Many refugees are seeing their hours cut or losing their job outright which can be tough for refugees due to the fact that they typically work in entry level jobs, according to Prescott.

"Refugees often end up working in certain industries with their first job until they get their feet under them. And those industries are transportation, hospitality, food service. Those are all industries that have been hit extremely hard by the pandemic," he said.

The International Rescue Committee received funding from public and private sources to help provide these services to the refugees. But Prescott said that those funds were limited, and they are continuing to look for more funding to continue to have those resources available.

Refugees struggle navigating COVID-19 assistance in the U.S.

As they struggle to cope with the pandemic, refugee families have turned to these non-profit organizations to get critical information about the pandemic and how to stop the spread of COVID-19.

"There's been lots of COVID ads about wearing your mask. Those are all in English and sometimes they're in Spanish. But they're definitely not in Swahili or in Arabic or in Kinyarwanda," said Prescott.

He added that they are translating flyers, videos, and any other information that is relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic so that refugees can be prepared. They are distributing them through Whatsapp text messages so they can be shared easily throughout refugee communities.

Refugees can apply for COVID-19 relief programs, like unemployment benefits, according to the Arizona Department of Economic Security. Initial claims for unemployment insurance peaked the first week of April. As of mid-August, there has been a 250% increase in claims compared to 2019, according to the University of Arizona Economic and Business Research Center.

"For a refugee who doesn't speak English, who maybe doesn't have access to a computer at home, maybe has never applied for a government application on their own before. They may not be digitally literate enough to go to the website and complete the application," Prescott said.

Braham added that many refugees don't feel comfortable filling out these types of applications without help, since a mistake could be costly.

"If you answer one question wrong because of barriers of English, that can jeopardize your benefits and so they come into us to really help them make sure everything's accurate, and they're getting what they need," said Braham

While it may seem challenging for the refugees right now, these organizations know that these families are tough enough to get through the pandemic, according to Prescott.

“The clients that we have are resilient. They’ve survived tremendous struggles in their own life prior to arriving in the United States,” said Prescott. “And so while we’re helping them overcome all of these barriers and challenges, there’s a lot of character and courage on the behalf of the refugees we serve.”