

‘We don't turn anyone away’: As virus forces some nonprofits to cut hours and services, refugee aid group works overtime

By Jessica Myers | Luce Foundation: Southwest Stories Fellowship

People who seek out [Refugees and Immigrants Community for Empowerment](#) often don't know where else to turn, according to Dominic Braham, executive director of the Phoenix nonprofit.

“A lot of times, when they come to us, it's kind of the last stop. They have no other place to go when they're looking for how to get a driver's license or get medical benefits,” he said. “We don't turn anyone away.”

The 3-year-old organization, led by refugees and immigrants, aims to help those same populations become self-sufficient after their arrival in the United States.

RICE provides employment and housing assistance, English classes, dental care and help navigating the immigration and education systems.

Those services have become even more vital during the COVID-19 pandemic, Braham said: As the virus forced many other community organizations to operate remotely, RICE has kept its doors open.

“Other organizations have cut their hours or gone virtual, and families may not be able to get on with virtual meetings if they don't have internet access,” he said. “So, they come to us. We've taken a lot more families in.”

In an interview with the Luce Foundation's Southwest Stories project, Braham discussed the additional hurdles COVID-19 has created for refugee communities and how RICE is responding.

Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

How has the pandemic affected the population RICE serves?

We have people who are unemployed, people who are working temporary jobs and low-wage jobs. A lot of those jobs have been cut in half or just eliminated during COVID. So, they're needing help to pay their rent. They're trying to keep food on the table.

A lot of times, because they're such large families, some of the public assistance benefits for food isn't enough, and they're looking for ways to supplement that.

We have a lot of multi-generational families where there's the grandparents, the parents and the kids in the same homes. They're not able to socially distance, and it's hard for them.

How has RICE addressed these issues?

We were lucky enough, through the advocacy of one of our board members, to get federal CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act funding through the city of Phoenix. That's allowing us to offer utilities relief and rent and mortgage relief. That's what we're knee-deep in doing right now.

Families can get up to \$600 in utility assistance and up to \$300 to pay their water bills. They can get up to \$1,100 in rent or mortgage assistance. Anyone who lives in the city of Phoenix and meets eligibility guidelines can come to our office, and we can help them fill out the paperwork for that.

Over 2,000 refugees also have come in within the past few months looking for employment. We want them to thrive and do what they do best, not settle for an entry-level job and jobs that are temporary. We want them to get into long-term careers and build their businesses, because they have that knowledge.

They also need to file to get unemployment benefits every week. There may be some language barriers, or they may not have internet or access to a computer. And if they make one mistake, that puts their benefits in jeopardy. So, that's another thing that we help them do.

At our physical location, we've been able to keep up with CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines by wearing face masks, offering hand sanitizer and using glass barriers.

How has RICE ensured refugee communities are aware of the services it's offering?

We're proud to say that all of our staff members and board members, 100%, identify with the community that we serve. That's a really good way to build relationships.

We have a Facebook page, and we're hands-on with real relationship-building in the office when people come in and walk them through.

We're looking to market more and create flyers to get the word out there even more.

What are RICE's major goals when it comes to advocating for refugees and immigrants during the pandemic?

I would go back to the reason we exist: to empower our community and have sustainable employment and build wealth for our families. We're trying to create pathways so they can provide for their family and leave a legacy for other generations. We want our families to build their best selves in all spaces in Arizona and have access to those small business resources and career pathways.

We're also trying to make sure these groups aren't left out of larger conversations (about aid). As I mentioned before, one of our board members was vital in getting the CARES Act grant from the city of Phoenix. As it was initially written, the refugee community was going to be left out.

During the council meeting, our board member left a comment and said, "What about refugees? We're not included?" From that conversation, a few refugee organizations were able to get funding for their populations.

I think the more we collaborate with cities and the state, the easier it will be to reach our long-term goals.