

STORIES OF IMPACT

Pursuing Health Equity through Welcoming Work

BACKGROUND

Welcoming America inspires people to build a different kind of community — one that embraces immigrants and fosters opportunity for all. The organization is leading a movement of inclusive communities across the nation becoming more prosperous by making everyone who lives there feel like they belong. Welcoming America connects a broad network of nonprofits and local governments and supports them in developing plans, programs, and policies that transform their communities into vibrant places where people respect each other and everyone's talents are valued and cultivated. The goal is to change systems and culture to help communities create policy, reinforce welcoming principles, and communicate the socioeconomic benefits of inclusion.



On April 19-21, 2016, Welcoming America brought together national and international audiences to its inaugural Welcoming Interactive. This Interactive provided participants an opportunity to establish new connections and exchange promising ideas to overcome divisiveness and increase the impact of efforts to build more inclusive communities for immigrants nationwide. One specific focus included incorporating health equity in welcoming work.

The following are stories of impact shared during the Welcoming Interactive. Welcoming America will use these stories to expand on key points addressed during the session, highlighting some of the communities leading the charge to achieve health equity while welcoming newcomers.

USING A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO TALK ABOUT REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Highly-effective interventions tailored to immigrant communities often arise from immigrant leadership and take a strengths-based approach to designing programs and policies that lift up immigrants. For example, the Lifting Latina Voices Initiatives (LLVI) through Atlanta's Feminist Women's Health Center adopted the *promotores de salud* model, common in many Latin American countries, to start conversations about reproductive health with Latinas. LLVI recognizes that "cultural norms, stereotypes, communication modalities and gender inequities continue to silence Latinas and suppress personal and interpersonal health and growth." The program counteracts these issues by providing open spaces for discussion, workshops, leadership, and mentoring opportunities with the goal of increasing empowerment of Latinas and increased reproductive awareness and health. The messages of the initiative spread to over 11,000 community members by using community assets—safe spaces where Latinas gathered, such as health, legal agencies, and children's soccer games. In launching this successful initiative, LLVI constructed a culturally appropriate strategy to provide health education, disrupting the dominant narrative that Latinas were not interested in talking about sex (Maria Azuri, personal communication, 4/20/2016). The success of LLVI hinged on the leadership of Latinas who brought familiarity with their own communities and could plug into safe spaces for Latinas.

DESIGNING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR REFUGEES IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA



The lack of appropriate behavioral health services is a significant refugee health concern, due to the trauma that they may experience prior to and after arriving in the United States. Yadhu Dhital, a fellow at Allegheny County Department of Human Services, explains the many sources of stress his community of Bhutanese refugees. “Some of my neighbors were raped, tortured, imprisoned, with a long history of fear and trauma. They had to learn a new place and there was a lot of stress with finding housing and food in the U.S.” (personal communication, 4/28/2016). Moreover, explains Dhital, Western mental health practitioners may not be effective at treating some refugee communities, who “don’t have an idea about mental health or are ashamed.” To provide culturally-appropriate solutions to addressing mental health needs of

the Bhutanese community and other immigrant groups, Allegheny County Department of Human Services funds local agencies to train immigrant community members to lead peer support groups for members of their respective communities. Each group facilitator has the flexibility to structure the group and choose topics of relevance to their particular group. Barbara Murock of Allegheny County Department of Health and Human Services describes one such group: “For example, we have some Bhutanese groups just for elders, where they do yoga and meditation and there’s a box where you can drop a question. They believe they have prevented suicides with this model.” (personal communication, 5/3/2016) This model provides support and training for community members to fill a critical health need in their community, while leaving flexibility to allow for discussion of behavioral health issues, which carry stigma for many people. It is a strength-based approach, building on natural and community supports.

DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES TO SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EQUITABLE GROWTH NEW HAMPSHIRE

The developers of New Hampshire’s health equity plan recognize that people of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods that lack elements that promote good health, such as fewer safe play areas and less access to healthy food; more environmental health hazards; and higher crime rates.

In addressing these factors, the plan advocates partnering broadly with agencies outside of the health sector that have the ability to address these social determinants of health. New Hampshire releases periodic report cards on both health outcomes and determinants of health, stratified by race and ethnicity with a ratio-based “disparity score” to help identify areas in need of attention. The report cards also explain how each indicator affects health, which is helpful for readers to contextualize factors that may seem distantly related to health equity. The New Hampshire plan also describes the importance of social inclusion of newcomers, whose arrival often generates unease in receiving communities and isolation for newcomers. If newcomers are able to establish wider connections in a community, the effect is described as “...generating a sense of belonging, which contributes to improved mental health and wellbeing. The other residents also benefit as their fear decreases, and as they expand their own networks, learning to benefit from the skills, knowledge, and cultural differences brought by their new neighbors.”

