



REFUGEE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

The Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) launched the Refugee Women's Institute (RWI) in 2014. An innovative program designed to build understanding and trust between Seattle refugee communities and the Seattle Police Department (SPD), the U.S. Conference of Mayors selected RWI for an innovation award at their 2015 convening in San Francisco.

Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs

About Us

Our mission is to improve the lives of Seattle's immigrant and refugee families.

We work to strengthen immigrant and refugee communities by engaging them in decisions about the City of Seattle's future, and improving the City's programs and services to meet the needs of all constituents.

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Genesis

As part of SPD's Safe Communities Initiative, OIRA facilitated a series of neighborhood conversations in immigrant and refugee communities. Families consistently mentioned wanting to develop stronger relationships with SPD.

Program Design

We designed the program over the course of nine months with extensive input from the RWI Advisory Committee that included refugees and staff from several City departments, Seattle's Immigrant and Refugee Commission, SPD officers, as well as the instructors and experts on curriculum development and trauma.

The Institute

Every Saturday for eight weeks, 20 refugee women and 20 female police officers met at Jefferson Community Center in Beacon Hill, a neighborhood where many immigrants and refugees live. The curriculum was a combination of discussion, group activities, and trainings. It was designed to facilitate relationship and trust building, address complex and sensitive issues, and increase the knowledge base of both refugee participants and police officers. Participants also learned how to access City programs, services, and subsidies such as the Utility Assistance Program.

Participants

SPD officers were from a range of units, including Administration, Patrol, Investigation, and others. The refugee participants had arrived to the U.S. in the last five years and came from Iran,

Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Yemen, Burma, and Bhutan. Participants could access childcare, bus tickets, meals, and small scholarships. Female interpreters worked closely with the refugee women and were additional beneficiaries of the program as they received assistance in expanding their business.

Results

All participants reported stronger one-on-one relationships with each other, and data indicated that even in an artificially created environment like RWI, participants had meaningful interactions that helped overcome bias.

Refugee participants demonstrated an increase in both confidence and trust in law enforcement, as well as increased knowledge of City systems and processes. They learned how to call 911 and reported greater comfort in: reaching out to police, using public transportation, paying utility bills, searching for housing, and exploring the City website for answers. SPD officers reported an increased knowledge of Seattle's refugee communities and a deeper understanding of their unique challenges. They also learned how to better work with people with limited English proficiency.

Finally, officers developed a presentation for their SPD colleagues to share what they had learned and how to apply this to their day-to-day operations. Refugee participants also shared what they had learned with their communities.