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(Interviewer)

Immigrant and Refugee-Led Capacity Development Network of Illinois
IRLCDN CBO spotlight a

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partnership with the University of Illinois at Chicago Institute on
Disability and Human Development,

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and Illinois Department of Human Services. Family Focus introductions.

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(Michelle Ramirez)

My name is Michelle Ramirez, I am the lead case manager at Family
Focus in Cicero.

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(Interviewer)

What motivates you to serve your immigrant and refugee communities?

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(Michelle Ramirez)

What motivates me to to serve our community? It's really the fact that
I can connect to the families.

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These are not strange families, even though I might not know or have a
connection with with the person directly.

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Their story is the story of my parents.

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And so I definitely see my parents and the families that come to our
office or I've spoken to in the past year and have never met.

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Right. With everything being virtual. So it's just like I are just
like my parents had people to support them, navigate the different

systems.

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I want to do the same for other families and hopefully have others replicate that.

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What is the most rewarding part of your work? How how thankful families are, how they're like when they say thank you.

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It comes from a very genuine place.

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And whether we do maybe support with baby essentials or clothing or help with public benefits, it gives them, I feel, a little bit of breathing room.

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Right. That piece of calmness that it's OK if this document is in English, someone can read it to me and really simplify it to help me understand.

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Sometimes the challenge isn't so much that the documents are in English or Spanish,

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but sometimes the documents, even in Spanish, are difficult to understand.

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And we also need to keep in mind the different educational levels of our families.

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So maybe they only have the reading level of second third grade and the documents can be not the friendliest to read, so.

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It's little things that we do, it's day to day very like,

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00:02:27,950 --> 00:02:34,670

I don't think with anything that a lot of the support that we provide is something out of out of the world.

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It's the basic needs. Its day to day needs to just that that genuine connection.

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(Interviewer)

What makes the work of your organization unique.

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(Michelle Ramirez)

Best parts and definitely one of those characteristics that that stands out with our agency is that most of us live in the community that we surface.

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So I grew up in Cicero, so I moved in when I was 10.

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I came from a different community and I've been here since.

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And so definitely it is it is what keeps me with my agency.

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Right. With this agency that even through college, a lot of people, a lot of students or just people that we grew up with, they want to make it out.

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Right. That's the big goal. That's that's the dream to make it out and come back.

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But to service only your immediate family, you can say support your

parents, things like that.

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But for me and for many of us, I know that the work that we do is for our community.

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So it's it's an us approach and it's not about me.

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It's about how do we help our community thrive?

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00:03:46,260 --> 00:03:53,580

How do we help them get to their highest potential that we know that if given the right tools, people can reach.

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So, I mean, I'm fairly close to our office.

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Many of my coworkers are also fairly close. So that there's that it's home it's great.

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00:04:02,520 --> 00:04:08,160

Our community is home. So therefore, the organization becomes home.

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(Interviewer)

With the challenges presented by covid-19 regarding service delivery,

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how do you feel your organization has responded in terms of supporting its immigrant and refugee communities?

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(Michelle Ramirez)

We have shifted everything that we do it to be where to even earlier I was speaking to my coworker,

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how and she you know, she mentions just like how did how did we work before?

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Just like the number of people that we were able to service prior to covid happening,

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00:04:37,640 --> 00:04:45,110

just everything from home visitors there doing virtual visits, relying much more on email on a different virtual platform.

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And again, keeping in mind that not all of our staff and not all of the families that we surface were comfortable with email

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or comfortable with even sending a picture message of documents that we need to apply for public benefits or such.

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And so it's been a learning experience for everyone. It's been a very, very tough year.

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So just like we love the work that we do, it's not always very, very fruitful.

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Right. It comes with many challenges. And of course, this year just kicked it up to a whole other level.

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The organization, everything from from the first day of when they announced that of the stay at home order, I think in March,

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everyone just started shrinking and shifted their mindset and the curriculum to clearly our families don't need services.

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Right. So how do we process and handle covid for ourselves and our own families,

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but also while supporting the entire community really to the best of their needs and our ability?

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Definitely everyone has been so responsive, I think,

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from people doing the groundwork to the leadership that they have been incredible in the sense of

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like when when you have those very long days and you just don't know how else to to service people,

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there's always someone there that they through this whole year and even before that,

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we have been able to check in with and just really like ground ourselves and think of next steps.

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00:06:11,300 --> 00:06:17,060

So I'm very I'm very glad. I'm really proud of how we have responded.

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And I will say we definitely got very creative. And I really do like how like the very intentional approach to all these changes.

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So one of I think the most significant, I think project.

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But because restaurants were closing. Right. And people were in quarantine and not working.

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00:06:39,590 --> 00:06:42,890

So then there's no income, so there's no groceries and all of that.

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00:06:42,890 --> 00:06:50,060

And you can't even go outside one of our local restaurants, a very small family business.

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We paired up with them and they were able to provide restaurant meals.

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So home cooked meals like you have the egg rolls and you have a lot of the like meals that

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it's not frozen meals and they deliver it to families that were currently covid positive.

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That was incredible. I mean, before I wouldn't have thought about doing something like that.

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So it's really interesting. Very, very interesting.

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(Interviewer)

Can you give us a snapshot of the different communities inclusive of languages and cultures that you have served in Cicero?

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(Michelle Ramirez)

Cicero itself is very is predominantly Latino, so our families are mostly of Latino backgrounds,

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country wise, it is mostly demographics is something that we do measure as an agency.

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And most of the families have a direct connection to Mexico.

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00:07:42,570 --> 00:07:48,140

So that's the main one, the main country. But Central Americans, there's a lot of languages.

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Spanish is mostly the native tongue of families here.

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We do have Latinos who are only English speaking or identify more with with you can say like the US culture.

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Right. But yes, it's definitely mostly Latinos. And then I would say other groups of color.

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00:08:08,040 --> 00:08:14,656

And I mean, again, there's a little bit of everything here, but that's mainly the people that come visit us.