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(Interviewer)

Immigrant and Refugee-Led Capacity Development Network of Illinois, IRLCDN. CBO Spotlight.

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

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and Illinois Department of Human Services, IDHS. Cass County Department of Public Health.

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Introductions.

(Audra Elam)

My name is Audra Elam. I'm the Welcome Center Coordinator here at the Cass County Health Department.

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(Interviewer)

What motivates you to serve your immigrant and refugee communities?

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(Audra Elam)

I think the the simplest way to answer that question, it's it's a need.

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It's a huge need, especially in Cass County. We're such a rural area. Resources are already scarce, resources specific to immigrants and refugees.

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We're the only one. You know, it's it's a huge need that I see every day in our community.

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And that's that's why I do it. That's why I stay here cause I want to build it up.

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And I wanted to make it, I want to make it into a larger resource for individuals here.

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(Interviewer)

What is the most rewarding part of your work?

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(Audra Elam)

I think anyone who is in this line of work will say it's incredibly rewarding to have a happy ending to a particularly difficult case.

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I think we all all experience that joy and that relief when we finally have a solution for somebody.

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But another another really rewarding part of this job, especially being in a small town.

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I have a really unique point of view of how our community supports and encourages our immigrant community.

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For example, we had a really, really devastating fire in May. An entire apartment building went down.

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13 individuals lost their homes, 10 of those 13 were immigrant individuals and our, people from our community,

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00:02:26,060 --> 00:02:31,400

we're just donating money coming in just everyday people. And again, we're rural.

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It's a very poor community already. And just from those individual donations, our community raised over \$25,000 for those people.

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So being able to see that from behind the scenes of just how many people came out and

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how those systems of community care are opening up for everyone in our community is very,

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very rewarding to see. And then on top of that, just it's such an opportunity,

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it's such a privilege to be in this position and get to build relationships, get to know so many of these wonderful families.

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00:03:18,260 --> 00:03:27,680

That's also just a huge reward in itself. So.

(Interviewer)

What makes the work of your organization unique?

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(Audra Elam)

The Cass County Welcome Center, I think this is very unique in comparison to all the organizations we've been meeting with over the past few months.

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A lot of those other organizations are in more populated areas or in Chicago.

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There's a lot of other resources around.

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Our Welcome Center is the only resource available in Cass County specific to immigrant refugee individuals. And also with it being such a small town,

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And your town is 5,000 people. It's tiny. It's it affords a lot of boots on the ground kind of work.

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00:04:12,740 --> 00:04:19,970

I get to know these families pretty well. You know, I have families that will call me or call our office.

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00:04:19,970 --> 00:04:26,540

Maybe they're in quarantine and they need something specific. Maybe they need a thermometer to monitor their care.

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00:04:26,540 --> 00:04:30,950

I can just go pick up a thermometer, drop it off on their house on my way home.

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00:04:30,950 --> 00:04:44,810

So that's a very unique to be able to be very much involved on not just as a Welcome Center, but as a community member on top of that.

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00:04:44,810 --> 00:04:50,950

And, yeah, I just I think we're very unique in that and that aspect of just

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how tight knit everyone, everything and everyone is here.

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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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(Audra Elam)

I think that's another thing that's very unique is our Welcome Center,

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our grant for our Welcome Center came through the Cass County Health Department.

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So I'm an extension of the health department. I was trained in contact tracing all throughout COVID.

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I had all of that information at my fingertips and we were able to very much make sure everybody

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00:05:36,060 --> 00:05:41,460

was getting the information they needed to stay healthy and stay safe throughout the pandemic,

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00:05:41,460 --> 00:05:50,130

making sure that our vaccine outreach and accessibility was was equitable.

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And I was directly involved with scheduling vaccine appointments for for especially our French speakers and our Spanish speakers,

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00:06:01,440 --> 00:06:14,760

scheduling COVID tests. I again was trained in contact tracing, so I did a lot of contact tracing interviews for immigrant individuals.

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And then on top of that, I was able to kind of go into my own assessments of, OK, do we need food in the house?

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00:06:20,760 --> 00:06:27,000

Do we need toiletries? During your time of quarantine, how are we going to get this to you?

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So, yeah, I feel like throughout COVID our Welcome Center and very much took on a role of like, OK,

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we're going to be COVID aides specifically to the immigrant community, which is now dialing back a little bit.

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But as far as operations went, nothing, nothing slowed down.

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In fact, I feel like it really there were weeks or it really, really sped up because we had so many families, our team,

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00:06:56,430 --> 00:07:06,030

and helping to monitor those those those families and their symptoms and making sure that everybody was getting the medical care that they needed.

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We also had an emergency financial grant here, financial assistance grant here at the health department, so I go to be directly involved with that.

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As I was speaking to a family, they said, oh, dad lost his job due to COVID.

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Well, I know of this program. So being a part of the health department, I've been an extension really of the health department.

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I've really ensured that our operations as a Welcome Center was very much intertwined with COVID education, COVID

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health and making sure that all families that were affected by COVID were getting the resources that they need.

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(Interviewer)

Please share an overview of the immigrant and refugee communities you serve.

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(Audra Elam)

I actually have been putting together a little training for the health department as a whole on the basic demographics that we have,

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all of our service providers are aware of who all are we serving in this community?

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And in my research for that training we have in this tiny county of the county itself, I think is only 12000 people.

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We have 34 different nationalities here.

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00:08:30,590 --> 00:08:35,810

And that's do we have there's a lot of factory work in this area.

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00:08:35,810 --> 00:08:44,900

And that's what draws a lot of people here. But our biggest community is so we have our Spanish speaking community.

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And that's a we have a lot of people from Mexico. We have a very big Dominican population, Cuban, Honduran, El Salvador, Guatemala.

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We have a handful of individuals from Colombia, Bolivia, Nicaragua, as well.

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Our African community has really started booming here since the early 2000s.

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Our biggest communities are Congolese families.

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And then we also have Togolese families from West Africa. We have Senegalese. We have people from Guinea, people from Burkina Faso.

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We have people from Liberia, really all over the continent.

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And in the last 5 years, we've been getting a large population from Myanmar, a large Burmese population.

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00:09:39,320 --> 00:09:46,790

We also have a handful of individuals from Lao's, from the Philippines, from Vietnam, India.

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00:09:46,790 --> 00:09:55,790

But her biggest or biggest populations are Spanish speaking, Spanish speaking individuals are those from Mexico.

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00:09:55,790 --> 00:10:00,770

Our French speaking individuals are those from the Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo,

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00:10:00,770 --> 00:10:08,720

Republic of Congo or Togo, and then from our Asian population, mostly Burmese individuals.

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00:10:08,720 --> 00:10:14,390

So it's a it's it's it's an array of languages, of cultures.

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00:10:14,390 --> 00:10:19,910

And that's that's another thing I just think it's really cool because where else can you find a tiny,

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00:10:19,910 --> 00:10:26,600

sleepy little town and then you're walking down the street and you're going to hear people speaking [inaudible]. You're going to hear Lingala.

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00:10:26,600 --> 00:10:33,045

You're you're going to hear Burmese. You're going to hear Spanish.



It's it's it's it's really cool.