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00:00:00,740 --> 00:00:10,040

(Interviewer)

Immigrant and refugee led Capacity Development Network of Illinois IRLCDN CBO spotlight a

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00:00:10,040 --> 00:00:15,440

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

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00:00:15,440 --> 00:00:29,660

and Illinois Department of Human Services IDHS. Arab American Family Services.

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00:00:29,660 --> 00:00:33,950

(Akram Salman)

My name is Akram Salman and I'm a lead with Arab-American Family Services.

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00:00:33,950 --> 00:00:40,400

I have been at Arab-American Family Services for five years and my position is a lead.

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00:00:40,400 --> 00:00:44,720

I'm also one of the elder department caseworkers.

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00:00:44,720 --> 00:00:49,630

I'm also a domestic violence and sexual assault victims advocate.

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00:00:49,630 --> 00:00:53,630

(Interviewer)

What motivates you to serve your immigrant and refugee communities?

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00:00:53,630 --> 00:01:00,500

(Akram Salman)

We are able to provide a voice for those who are voiceless. And when I say that, I mean those who have a language barrier.

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00:01:00,500 --> 00:01:03,890

There's a lot of immigrants in our community that do not speak the language.

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00:01:03,890 --> 00:01:13,310

There's a lot of immigrants in the community that do not even understand the policies, the procedures, the small little laws that take into place.

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00:01:13,310 --> 00:01:20,310

And that's why we are here, to serve our community and to give them the benefit that they truly deserve.

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00:01:20,310 --> 00:01:25,040

(Interviewer)

What is the most rewarding part of your work?

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00:01:25,040 --> 00:01:32,840

(Akram Salman)

I really can't just choose one rewarding part of my position or the work that we do, an Arab-American Family Services,

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00:01:32,840 --> 00:01:42,560

every day that I get to serve the community is actually very rewarding when a family comes in and it's whether it's a refugee family,

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00:01:42,560 --> 00:01:47,240

an immigrant family or even a family who was born here in the United States.

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00:01:47,240 --> 00:01:53,330

And they do not know what they qualify for in terms of services or in terms of benefits.

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00:01:53,330 --> 00:01:57,590

And they walk out with an abundance of resources,

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00:01:57,590 --> 00:02:03,140

having just come in with one question and they've walked out with something that could set them for life.

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00:02:03,140 --> 00:02:08,960

That's very rewarding. And if you want me, I can hone in on an

example.

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00:02:08,960 --> 00:02:16,700

If a refugee comes in and they don't understand that, they do qualify for something as simple as financial assistance,

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00:02:16,700 --> 00:02:23,810

rental assistance or SNAP benefits because they do worry about where their next meal is going to come from,

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00:02:23,810 --> 00:02:28,070

how they will help their children eat or be a part of the community.

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00:02:28,070 --> 00:02:33,020

When I know I had a hand in helping them achieve that, it's very rewarding.

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00:02:33,020 --> 00:02:37,490

And I'm so lucky and humble to do that on a daily basis.

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00:02:37,490 --> 00:02:42,650

It brings so much joy to families knowing that they have someone in the community who can speak their

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00:02:42,650 --> 00:02:47,810

language and understand their cultural background and understand the barriers that they're going through,

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00:02:47,810 --> 00:02:56,540

whether it's it's the barriers of having non-legal status or barriers of not understanding the culture shock, barriers

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00:02:56,540 --> 00:03:06,290

of not speaking the language or even filling out a simple application where they do not find Arab-American or even Middle Eastern on an application.

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00:03:06,290 --> 00:03:13,890

I am there to guide them through the process and let them know you do exist. We are here to assist you and we are here to help you.

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00:03:13,890 --> 00:03:18,470

(Interviewer)

What makes the work of your organization unique?

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00:03:18,470 --> 00:03:27,380

(Akram Salman)

We are all bilingual caseworkers, we are all bilingual advocates, and like I mentioned before, we do understand the cultural background.

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00:03:27,380 --> 00:03:34,430

We do understand the ethnic needs of our community, no matter what area or what background they come from.

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00:03:34,430 --> 00:03:45,450

We are so diverse and inclusive in Arab-American family services that we are so ready and easily adapt to the changes that happen on a daily basis.

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00:03:45,450 --> 00:03:51,380

So we are there to provide and we do understand the ethnic background that they come from and the

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00:03:51,380 --> 00:03:56,850

special attention that they need due to the lack of resources from whatever area they are coming from.

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00:03:56,850 --> 00:04:04,370

We are there to assist, no matter what kind of services they come in looking for.

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00:04:04,370 --> 00:04:08,330

(Interviewer)

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

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00:04:08,330 --> 00:04:17,730

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

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00:04:17,730 --> 00:04:30,120

(Akram Salman)

Responded very well, even when the state came down to where there was a stay at home order to us, that meant let's kick it into higher gear.

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00:04:30,120 --> 00:04:39,030

We hit the ground running the next day. I remember the next day there was a congregate meal that was supposed to be delivered to the elderly.

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00:04:39,030 --> 00:04:48,210

And COVID did not set us back, not even one bit. We were ready to still serve our community despite covid throwing a wrench in

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00:04:48,210 --> 00:04:53,730

our way and trying to hinder us from serving our Valeyard community members.

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00:04:53,730 --> 00:04:58,440

We hit the ground running the next day. We are all out there serving meals to the community,

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00:04:58,440 --> 00:05:07,230

serving meals to the elderly just so that they do not feel the pressure or the barriers of what this pandemic has really put us through.

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00:05:07,230 --> 00:05:17,700

I also believe that working from home has made us reach out to our community members in a way that they never thought was even possible.

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00:05:17,700 --> 00:05:23,550

We were we were available to them whenever they needed to talk to someone or whenever

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00:05:23,550 --> 00:05:27,960

they needed to ask about their application process or an update on their status.

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00:05:27,960 --> 00:05:36,750

We were readily available to them. And our clients were very thankful that COVID did not set us back one bit.

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00:05:36,750 --> 00:05:45,660

There are so many people who are worried about their financial status during COVID we were able to help them apply for rental assistance.

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00:05:45,660 --> 00:05:51,300

We were able to apply to help them apply for emergency financial assistance just to be that

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00:05:51,300 --> 00:06:00,480

kind of beam of hope or a glimmer of hope in such a pandemic that really scared everybody,

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00:06:00,480 --> 00:06:07,260

confused everybody, especially those who don't speak the language, who really don't know what's going on.

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00:06:07,260 --> 00:06:12,480

You know, the immigrants and the refugees that have just arrived to this country and all of a sudden COVID hit.

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00:06:12,480 --> 00:06:18,120

It's it really did. It threw them back a little bit.

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00:06:18,120 --> 00:06:22,210

It confused them. It scared them. It made them worry.

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00:06:22,210 --> 00:06:26,940

It made them feel like they had no one to turn to. And just for Arab-American Family Services,

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00:06:26,940 --> 00:06:34,320

with all the outreach that we have done with all the social media outreach that we have done with our everyday being part of the community,

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00:06:34,320 --> 00:06:37,470

physically being part of the community outside the offices,

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00:06:37,470 --> 00:06:43,320

letting people know although the office is physically closed, we are still here to assist you.

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00:06:43,320 --> 00:06:51,570

We are still here to help you. We're more than willing to reach out to you in any way that we possibly can.

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00:06:51,570 --> 00:06:57,450

You know, we never stopped working. So, I mean, just if anything,

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00:06:57,450 --> 00:07:06,000

COVID really made us connect with the community on a much stronger level and let them know that we can reach out to you through social media.

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00:07:06,000 --> 00:07:12,450

We can reach out to you through Zoom meetings. We can reach out to you through emails, through text messages.

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00:07:12,450 --> 00:07:15,690

We did not lose contact with any of our community members anything.

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00:07:15,690 --> 00:07:25,260

We gained so many more community members who tried to reach out to Arab-American Family Services because they saw the work that we do on social media.

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00:07:25,260 --> 00:07:31,110

And then it just made them feel like they were finally part of a community who's willing to

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00:07:31,110 --> 00:07:36,240

understand where they're coming from and who's willing to understand their ethnic challenges.

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00:07:36,240 --> 00:07:39,990

And unfortunately, being someone from an immigrant community,

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00:07:39,990 --> 00:07:46,260

coming from an immigrant background or a refugee background makes people feel like they are less than.

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00:07:46,260 --> 00:07:48,750

And they make it's unfortunately,

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00:07:48,750 --> 00:07:55,800

there's a lot of agencies out there that do not have the same experience that we do at Arab-American Family Services.

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00:07:55,800 --> 00:08:00,240

They do not have the same service skill that we do an Arab-American Family Services.

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00:08:00,240 --> 00:08:04,680

We pride ourselves on being able to connect with the clients on a different level,

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00:08:04,680 --> 00:08:08,550

and that's being able to help them feel like they are right at home.

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00:08:08,550 --> 00:08:11,310

They did not skip a beat. There is nothing missing.

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00:08:11,310 --> 00:08:21,690

We are there every step of the way from Challenge A until they graduate beyond challenge C.

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00:08:21,690 --> 00:08:26,880

(Interviewer)

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

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00:08:26,880 --> 00:08:32,310

(Akram Salman)

What I would really like to highlight is all of the communities that we serve and we serve the immigrant community,

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00:08:32,310 --> 00:08:36,240

we serve the refugee community, we service low income communities.



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00:08:36,240 --> 00:08:43,450

We service all minority communities. That does not mean we do not include everybody is as diverse as we are.

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00:08:43,450 --> 00:08:50,880

We like to pride ourselves on inclusivity as well. There's a lot of people that talk about diversity, but there is no inclusivity.

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00:08:50,880 --> 00:08:53,070

A bonus with Arab-American Family Services,

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00:08:53,070 --> 00:08:59,160

is we include anybody and everybody who walks through the door or even picks up the phone and calls our office,

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00:08:59,160 --> 00:09:05,520

sends us an email, sends us a Facebook message. We are there to service all of the communities around us.

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00:09:05,520 --> 00:09:13,590

We are specifically based in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. But that does not mean we don't include all those who who reach out to us.

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00:09:13,590 --> 00:09:14,790

And, you know,

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00:09:14,790 --> 00:09:23,220

our what I what I really like to say is I'm very biased to the elderly community and the disabled community because I work so closely with them.

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00:09:23,220 --> 00:09:28,830

And I feel like there are not a lot of laws that support the elderly or support the disabled community.

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00:09:28,830 --> 00:09:32,100

And we are there to give them the assistance that they lack or the assistance

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00:09:32,100 --> 00:09:37,710

that they are missing from other community agencies or from society in general.

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00:09:37,710 --> 00:09:44,970

What we really do pride ourselves with every American family services is we do validate the existence of our community members.

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00:09:44,970 --> 00:09:52,050

Unfortunately, we are labeled as white people and to tell our community members, you are Arab-American,

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00:09:52,050 --> 00:09:58,980

you have the right to exist as an Arab-American, you have a right to exist as a Middle Eastern community member, a Middle Eastern client.

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00:09:58,980 --> 00:10:03,750

We are here to give you the voice that you believe lacks within you.

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00:10:03,750 --> 00:10:11,130

We are here to give you the voice to help you achieve that level in the community or achieve that level within your

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00:10:11,130 --> 00:10:17,880

children's school or achieve that level just with the community around you to to help you understand you do fit.

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00:10:17,880 --> 00:10:21,300

And we are here to assist you. We are here to help you.

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00:10:21,300 --> 00:10:33,194

And if a category on an application doesn't exist that you can connect with, we will create that category for you because you do deserve to be heard.