

Immigrant & Refugee Task Force Recommendations

The Immigrant and Refugee (I&R) Task Force, meeting since August 2011 and with representation among culturally-focused agencies, mainstream shelter providers, housing authorities, DSHS, schools, voluntary resettlement agencies and others, has developed recommendations and implementation strategies to increase access to housing and supportive services among immigrants and refugees in King County. The first body of work was to identify common SCENARIOS for how and why I&R households become homeless. Next, the Task Force identified that households facing these scenarios need a range of RESOURCES to respond to housing crises, identified BARRIERS they face in accessing these resources, and promising SOLUTIONS to streamline access and reduce barriers. Finally, the Task Force held a series of FOCUS GROUPS to vet the issues identified through the work of the Task Force and assist in developing final RECOMMENDATIONS.

As the work progressed, I&R Task Force members learned that 24% of King County households speak a language other than English at home, that shelters report an increasing number of immigrants and refugees among their participants, and that SHA and KCHA report that a majority of the families living in garden community public housing are I&R families. Their barriers are mostly around the need to acquire skills, tools and time to access living wage employment. With this as the focus, the proposed solutions to homelessness have less to do with an infusion of resources than the need to make the existing systems work better for I&R beneficiaries, and to provide more equitable and effective access to resources.

The Task Force's recommendations comprise four distinct themes:

1. **Progressive and Supportive English Learning Programs – address the unique foundational barriers / challenges of immigrants and refugees.**

Background: The major theme that arose from the Task Force work and focus groups was the need to support English acquisition among I&R populations in order that they might leverage appropriate resources and prepare themselves for survival, independent living, and living wage employment. The typical adult English learner requires three years active learning to become proficient. Federal funding cannot meet this challenge due to regulatory restrictions. Other pathways, including LEP (an employment-focused program for Limited English Proficient adults on TANF) are necessary but not sufficient because its ESL is time-limited and focused on skills training over basic English acquisition. Recommended solutions include progression of initial survival English, daily living English, and workplace ESL programs. As well, there is inadequate childcare, transportation and flexible scheduling to support attendance, while youth and young adults have specific learning needs. Short term, better linkages are needed among existing ESL services. Long term, we need to extend the ability of I&R adults to stay with their learning for years, not just months. This will likely require state or regional investment, and the need to identify a long-term 'owner' of this effort as it is outside of the purview of CEH.

Recommendations for a CEH role:

- Identify existing coalitions and programs that facilitate progressive and supportive English learning (I&R providers, schools, colleges, etc.) and help establish partnerships to better link existing ESL trainings
- Assist the partnership in seeking initial and ongoing funding sources.
- Seek a permanent owner for the project. Potential co-owners: Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs and King County Equity & Social Justice Initiative (ESJI).

2. **Increase Representation of Immigrants and Refugees on Policy Boards to Develop an Immigrant and Refugee Lens – eliminate institutional barriers created when I&R issues are dealt with as an afterthought.**

Background: Policy is frequently developed with minimal input from immigrant and refugee communities. Emerging policy considerations need to better evaluate policy decisions and program outcomes by developing and using an

“Immigrant & Refugee Lens”. Since 24% of KC residents speak a language other than English at home, such focus is appropriate and necessary. The Task Force recommends that regional policy boards set a goal of increasing representation of immigrants and refugees among board members and commissioners.

Recommendations for a CEH role:

- Identify at least 10 policy boards for which to urge representational consideration, seeking at least three I&R representatives on each board (three reps assures ‘critical mass’ and reduces isolation of members.)
- Monitor rate of ethnically-focused agencies delivering services within the homeless system.
- Work with mainstream homeless system to facilitate true partnerships across providers and culturally-focused providers; encourage other mainstream systems to adopt similar approaches.

3. Increase and Reward Cultural Competency in Mainstream Homeless System – enhance the current service delivery system and how to make it more responsive.

Background: Mainstream homeless providers sometimes face barriers providing culturally-relevant services. Culturally-focused agencies sometimes face barriers helping their clients’ access housing services. The two often form partnerships for service delivery, but culturally focused agencies report they are asked to provide services ‘in the interest of their client’ with inadequate (or even no) remuneration. The task force identified that the mainstream homeless system, in particular and because it is the dominant system, needs to demonstrate operational improvements that exhibit cultural competence in order to reduce these barriers; however, the definition of cultural competence is largely undefined. The Minority Executive Director’s Coalition (MEDC) has developed a definition that emphasizes “a set of behaviors attributes and policies enabling an agency (or individual) to work effectively in cross cultural situations”, using three guiding principles: Commitment, Accessibility and Relevance. Cultural competency could also be addressed through funding and contract monitoring practices, and creating stronger partnerships between mainstream homeless providers and culturally-focused agencies with more balanced compensation.

Recommendations for a CEH role:

Work with local funders to understand and potentially adopt MEDC’s definition of cultural competency and assure that RFPs require and reward substantive evidence of 1) Commitment, 2) Accessibility, and 3) Relevance. Options could include the use of a bigger point spread for respondents demonstrating cultural competence, stronger evidence of partnerships across culturally-focused and mainstream homeless agencies, a commitment to consistently include reviewers who bring with them an I&R lens as their main focus, and accountability to demonstrate that the funded agencies provide evidence of follow through on cultural elements written into funding proposals.

4. Increase Efficiency Gains in Existing Resources – improve the current resources so they serve more immigrants and refugees along with other vulnerable populations.

Background: Immigrants and refugees are in need (sometimes in desperate need) of the same sorts of resources needed by other homeless or at-risk households: housing supports for low wage workers, cash assistance, child care, treatment to overcome trauma and PTSD. As noted above, many of solutions discussed by the I&R task force have less to do with an infusion of resources than the need to make the existing systems work better for I&R beneficiaries and provide more equitable and effective access to resources. Efficiencies can be gained by making it easier to navigate services in ways that better accommodate limited English speakers, improve linkages to programs that create self-sufficiency, and support more rapid movement out of public housing and thereby increase opportunities for new arrivals to access supported housing and, in turn, move towards self sufficiency.

Recommendations for a CEH role:

- Work with Housing Authorities to develop a toolkit of incentives and subsidies to support efficient use of public housing stock
- Work with Seattle Office of Housing and non-profit housing developers to identify specific housing designs that serve newly arrived and/or low-income I&R populations [initial discussions are pending].