

Catholic Multicultural Center Receives Multi-year Grant to Develop Mental Health Supports for Immigrants

By Laura Green, CMC Grants & Communications Coordinator

Thanks to a new multi-year grant, the Catholic Multicultural Center (CMC) in Madison, WI is launching a program to address the short- and long-term mental health needs of immigrants and refugees in Dane County and the surrounding areas. This project is funded by the Wisconsin Partnership Program (WPP) at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

"Many immigrants have made the journey to the United States because their lives were threatened in their countries of origin. This means that they may have experienced trauma before coming here and during their immigration process," explained CMC Associate Director Becca Schwartz. "We are offering support that is language specific and culturally responsive, to meet people where they're at, which we hope will give them what they need to heal as they build their lives here."



This initiative involves four key components:

1. Providing **first-level mental health supports** to immigrants and refugees in the form of peer-support groups, using an existing mental health curriculum designed for refugees.
2. Conducting **peer-led research** on the barriers to accessing to mental health care and how to effectively address them, with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) at UW-Madison.
3. **Educating the broader community** about the mental health needs of immigrants and how non-immigrant allies can be supportive.
4. **Opening career pathways** to mental health related fields (psychology, social work, peer support specialists, etc).

"We all know that there is a huge shortage of mental health services in general," said Sara Camacho, former mental health services provider and current board member of Open Doors

for Refugees (ODFR). “For your average person, with a solid knowledge of English and commercial insurance, trying to get connected to mental health services is really challenging. **Then you throw in other obstacles like English not being your primary language, not being familiar with the U.S. healthcare system, and facing what may be a very difficult time in your life, and accessing [mental health] services becomes very daunting.”**



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This new initiative aims to make mental health services more accessible to immigrants. **CMC will work with four groups to offer linguistically appropriate, culturally sensitive mental health support groups: Latinos, Afghans, Arabic-speaking, and Swahili-speaking.** CMC is already working with these populations in various capacities, and has the established trust and

name-recognition needed to serve these vulnerable groups. A network of partners including NAMI Dane County and Journey Mental Health will help provide additional support where professional intervention is needed for a client. However, the lack of healthcare providers from these communities creates additional barriers to accessing service.

Under this project, Dr. Matthew Wolfgram of WCER (UW-Madison) will lead a community-based model of research to investigate barriers to the delivery of culturally appropriate and effective mental health services for Wisconsin immigrant communities. **Findings will be used not only to inform future efforts of the programming at the CMC, but will also be shared throughout the state in an effort to foster opportunities for mental health for immigrants on a broader scale.**

Along with the research, **this initiative intends to address gaps in service over the longer-term by fostering an increase in culturally competent, representative service providers.** CMC will provide paid training and practical experience to peer leaders from each of the populations served, so they may take a leadership role in coordinating and facilitating the support groups. Peer-leaders and support group participants who wish to take their journey a step further will be able to attend periodic mental health career pathways presentations from Madison College to learn what mental health-related careers exist and the routes to pursue them. CMC will offer



scholarships and advisory support to immigrant peer leaders who choose to pursue these career pathways. CMC staff feel this is a crucial component for positively shaping the landscape of mental health in Wisconsin to be more inclusive and representative of the individuals in need of services. **At the same time, opening doors for more immigrants to enter the mental health field will address the overall shortage of mental health service providers, benefiting all Wisconsinites.**

This work will be led by the newly hired CMC Mental Health Support Program Manager, Zakia Hassani, M.A. Hassani is an experienced clinical psychologist and mental health professional originally from Afghanistan, whose experience and credentials will greatly enrich the program and enhance CMC's ability to provide basic mental health services.

This initiative is a true collaborative effort to be carried out in partnership with other agencies providing mental health services and/or working with immigrants, including the African Center for Community Development, Islamic Center of Madison, and ODFR. Camacho explained, "Our strength [at ODFR] has been providing that initial warm welcome to refugees (setting up a home, getting their first round of winter wear, driving them to first couple months of medical appointments). **This collaboration is a chance to help us address our clients more as a whole person and make a bigger, longer lasting impact on their well-being.**"



Schwartz added that for CMC, **"I hope that this program will be a resource for newcomers to our community to help them address challenges they may be facing, from stress to depression to PTSD.** We are thrilled that our program was chosen to receive WPP funding."

The CMC expects its first immigrant-led mental health support groups to be up and running by June of this year. The WPP-funded work will continue through 2027, after which CMC and its partners intend to have the well-established program structure and financial stability to continue this much-needed initiative well into the future.