

Immigrants Seeking Safety

A newly launched project that provides culturally specific services

By Manisha Dass

Immigrant victims, whether in the United States with documentation or without, face unique challenges when they find themselves in abusive relationships. Their challenge to leave the relationship becomes exponentially more difficult because of certain barriers which are distinct to the immigrant population. These barriers include language, cultural, fear of reporting the abuse to authorities, and fear of repercussive actions that authorities might take, such as taking their children away or being deported.

Immigrants Seeking Safety, a newly launched project in Wake County, provides services that are culturally specific to the target communities of the projects: victims of South Asian descent, and victims of Hispanic descent. The project started last August and is a three-year project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with local funding partners including Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, Triangle Community Foundation, N.C. Governors Crime Commission, and United Way of the Greater Triangle.

Service providers have come together to give clients the attention and services they need, often being able to combat one of the largest barriers the immigrant community has: language barriers. Collaborators all provide bilingual (and in some cases trilingual) services to the victims, which often makes the victims feel like their support is magnified. Many victims feel isolated because of the domestic violence and their isolation is furthered when they feel like they cannot go to anyone for help because they don't know the language. Funders and collaborative partners saw a growing need for the project for victims in Wake County, which is how the project developed. "We are seeing an increase in the number of immigrant clients who have experienced domestic violence and need help navigating the legal system and connecting with other resources in our community," said Kathy Johnson, InterAct's Associate Executive Director.

The five service providers collaborating for Immigrants Seeking Safety are InterAct, Legal Aid, Safe Child, Kiran Inc., and ALPES (Alianza Latina Pro-Educación en Salud). The collaborators work together in order to maximize efficiency of services provided to the clients. The collaborative partners meet once a month, and have successfully completed six months of their three year project. Though the project has just taken off, many partners feel confident in the direction of which the project is headed.

The three areas that members of the Immigrants Seeking Safety address for victims of domestic violence are client services, volunteer recruitment and training, and community awareness and education. InterAct and Kiran both provide 24-hour crisis lines for

victims to call and seek counseling in during crisis, and both agencies provide walk-in crisis counseling with culturally competent counselors. Safe Child provides an educational program (Crianza con Cariño) for Hispanic Families and support group.

Collaborators are all involved in volunteer recruitment and training. Volunteers play a key role in providing support to staff and are selected after careful screening and a mandatory training. Education is one of the most critical factors in breaking the cycle of domestic violence. "Many immigrants may not know that there are organizations that can help them when they experience domestic violence," said Ritu Kaur, InterAct's Associate Director of Community Relations and the project's director. "They may also think that their immigration status and language barriers will prevent them from receiving services."

The third area the project focuses on is community awareness. Community awareness is essential and includes participating in local cultural events for outreach as well as domestic violence training in a professional setting. "Our community's network of support for domestic violence victims will be stronger as a result of this partnership," Kaur said. "More people will know how to access community resources to promote healthy families."

Imagine being able to talk, but not having a voice. Imagine being abused by your partner and feelings like you have absolutely nowhere to go. The successful launch and implementation of Immigrants Seeking Safety aims to connect the immigrants with the resources they have a right to. Help is available and victims do not have to suffer in silence because they are immigrants.

If you are in a domestic violence situation or know someone that can benefit from the Immigrant Seeking Safety project, contact InterAct's 24-Hour Domestic Violence crisis lines at 919.828.7740 to have an initial conversation with a counselor and get the necessary referrals to collaborators of the project.

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