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## News

# Chapel Hill receives \$375,000 to use for refugee, immigrant support initiative



Photo courtesy of the Refugee Community Partnership.

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August 16, 2022 | 4:52pm EDT

The Town of Chapel Hill received a \$375,000 grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation to fund its Building Integrated Communities (BIC) initiative, which aims to support immigrant and refugee residents.

Per a June action plan update, the BIC plan seeks to research the best practices for refugee affordable housing, develop a line of interpreters to translate for those who speak languages other than English and strengthen the Town's connection to local services that interact with refugees and immigrants.

Chapel Hill's BIC project is a product of UNC's statewide BIC program, which is run by UNC's Latino Migration Project. The program has partnered with communities all across the state, including Chapel Hill, Winston-Salem and Siler City.

As of 2019, about 9,600 residents, or 15.8 percent of Chapel Hill's total, were born outside of the United States. About 24 percent of these foreign-born residents lived in households with a limited English speaking ability in 2016.

Residents born outside of the U.S. without U.S. citizenship had a median household income of \$55,562 in 2019, while community members with U.S. citizenship had a median household income of over \$72,000.

Sarah Viñas, Chapel Hill's director of affordable housing and community connections, said the Town's BIC action plan addresses five areas: public transportation, housing, public safety, leadership and government communication. She explained that all of these areas were identified through extensive community engagement with foreign-born and immigrant residents.

The Town has already implemented a language service line that helps non-English-speaking residents with translation, as well as worked with affordable housing providers to expand eligibility criteria to serve more foreign-born community members, Viñas said.

Valerie Stewart, the director of leadership and capacity building at the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, said she worked on the grant for Chapel Hill.

She called it an "acceleration grant," noting each community with a BIC program had already created an action plan to implement inclusive policies. The foundation, which was established in 2000, has invested over \$190 million into communities across the state, Stewart said.

Stewart said Blue Cross and Blue Shield is excited to be in partnership with Chapel Hill and other communities. She said it can show that change can happen and people can start to hear and see what Latino and immigrant populations need.

"What we're doing at the foundation is really helping to accelerate the implementation," she said. "Those plans — it took a lot of time and energy and relationships and partnerships to develop and now we want to see faster progress in making some of those changes because we think our communities will be healthier when we start to implement some of them."

According to Flicka Bateman, the director of the Refugee Support Center in Carrboro, the most important aspect of creating an integrated community is having people from all communities live there. However, due to rising rent costs, she said, refugees are moving out of Chapel Hill.

Bateman said some foreign-born residents do want to stay in the community because of the school system, work and resources. She added that although they reside in other areas, they still work in Chapel Hill.

She also said that a possible solution might be to use the grant money on a municipal equivalent to Section 8, or housing choice vouchers, in Chapel Hill.

Section 8 is a federal initiative that helps low-income families, people with disabilities and older adults afford housing. A family's income must be 50 percent or less of the median income for their county, and 75 percent of vouchers must go to applicants whose income is less than 30 percent.

"Housing, housing, housing. Got to have people live here," Bateman said.

In regard to the Town's language service, Bateman said she was pleased and believes Chapel Hill has made improvements in terms of reaching out linguistically. Still, she said, it's one thing to have language accessibility, and another thing to use it.

Daniella Runyambo, co-director for programs and community impact at the Refugee Community Partnership, was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She moved to the U.S. in 2007 and to the Chapel Hill-Carrboro area in 2015.

Though the language barrier for foreign-born residents has also been addressed by the Town, she said she wants to see even more support.

Runyambo said, for example, a doctor's appointment doesn't start at a hospital, but when a patient is thinking about making that appointment. Being able to navigate different environments and systems is important so that people have greater available support beyond just accessing a system, she said.

She also said the RCP is looking for community interpreters to be provided across the town.

"We've seen the difference when someone feels comfortable navigating a system because they know that they have a network of support that an organization provides," she added.