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Town of Chapel Hill Receives \$375,000 Grant to Support Immigrant and Refugee Populations

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AUGUST 4, 2022

GOVERNMENT

By Yueying Yu
Correspondent

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The Town of Chapel Hill was awarded a \$375,000 grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation in support of its Building Integrated Communities (BIC) initiative, a community planning project that improves relationships and communication with local immigrant and refugee populations.

The grant is a portion of a \$1.55 million grant that the Blue Cross NC Foundation awarded UNC’s Institute for the Study of the Americas which houses the statewide BIC initiative that partners with local governments to implement BIC projects for immigrants and refugees. The grant will go to the statewide initiative itself and local partners such as the Town of Chapel Hill.

Sarah Viñas, director of the Affordable Housing and Community Connections Department, said in a news release that the town is excited to utilize the grant.

“We are thrilled to have this support from the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation to continue advancing the Council’s Equity and Inclusion goals by making Chapel Hill a welcoming and inclusive community to immigrant and refugee residents,” she said.

The grant will go toward hiring a full-time coordinator position responsible for implementing the town’s BIC Action Plan, developing paid engagement and leadership opportunities for immigrant and refugee residents, growing a bank of community interpreters, and conducting staff training on language, access and cultural competency.

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Started in 2017, the town's BIC project has held discussion groups and public meetings with community members and incorporated its research into formulating a BIC Action Plan in 2019. The plan addresses inclusion in government communication, housing, leadership, public safety, law enforcement, and public transportation.

According to the BIC Action Plan Implementation Update in June, the town has made significant progress in language access, including providing free translation and interpretation services for town meetings, materials, and transit services. It has also worked with Habitat for Humanity to amend their policies to serve undocumented residents.

However, some items in the BIC Action Plans have not yet been initiated. These include creating a more "centralized and intentional" outreach request process for the police department, designing multilingual presentations on gun violence and youth substance use with immigrant and refugee residents, engaging youth to participate in the



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town's decision-making process, and piloting a demand-based transition solution with Chapel Hill Transit.

A few items remain in early stages, such as developing partnerships with community immigrant and refugee organizations like the Refugee Community Partnership, expanding cross-cultural learning opportunities for town employees, and increasing the police department's attendance at events and meetings to build relationships with immigrants and refugees.

Viñas said that some of the delay was due to the impact of COVID-19.

“We had several strategies that required in-person interactions, things like school visits to town hall to include more immigrant and refugee residents. Those had been put on hold because until recently, town facilities were closed to the public,” she said.

With the grant, the Town will have more capacity and resources to help advance many of the items listed in the Action Plan, Viñas added.

Chapel Hill Mayor Pam Hemminger said the hiring of a full-time staff member will be a tremendous boost to the initiative, as the coordinator will have more capacity to fulfill a key aspect of the BIC initiative: forming connections with community members, translators, and organizations.

Hemminger added the BIC initiative is essential to the Town's long-term goal of achieving diversity, equity and inclusion [DEI].

“We really want to be an inclusive community and to do that, you have to be able to reach out to communities and be able to speak in their language so they can understand better, and to get that feedback that goes back and forth,” she said. “It just helps us understand better what their needs are and what the opportunities may be to help.”



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**Town of
Chapel Hill
Receives
\$375,000
Grant to
Support
Immigrant
and
Refugee
Populations**

Diversity, equity and inclusion continue to be a focus of the town's initiatives, Hemminger said. This June, the Town hired its first DEI officer, Shenekia Weeks, and has plans to hire a program analyst to assist in the implementation of town-wide DEI initiatives.

Hemminger said that the town is seeking more ways to engage with diverse populations through international cultural centers and festivals.

“We’re trying to show people, you know, that we have a lot in common to celebrate, but we also have a lot of cultural things that are important to recognize and celebrate as well, so I want to see more of that,” she said. “I want to see people engaged in many different ways.”

With the development of its BIC initiative, the Town wants to set a model for other towns and cities, Hemminger added.

“We’ve been working on this program for a while, and it’s setting a model for other cities and towns to take on,” she said. “If we could show success in this model and give people a working basis, we’re hoping that it’ll be replicated across the country because we are seeing a lot more diversity in all our metro areas.”

“I think showing and setting that example is not just important for Chapel Hill, but for other communities as well, especially in North Carolina where we’re seeing a big influx of different kinds of people,” Hemminger added.

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