

## Tips for Developing Programs and Services that Engage Immigrant and Refugee Seniors

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Engaging in programs and services improves health and well-being for seniors and lessens the negative impact of isolation. Immigrant and refugee seniors, however, may have difficulty accessing programs and services because of barriers such as poor English language skills, lack of transportation, limited income, and precarious housing situations. In addition, seniors programs and services offered by organizations may not be relevant or interesting to immigrant and refugee seniors.

Designing programs and services that address the needs of immigrant and refugee seniors can help overcome barriers they face and encourage them to become involved in your organization. The following guidelines will help you develop programs and services that welcome and engage immigrant and refugee seniors.

1. Provide recreational and other programs that do not require English language skills to participate (e.g. fitness and dance classes).
2. Start by offering a program that is targeted to a specific cultural and/or linguistic group to draw them to your organization so they become familiar with what you offer.
3. Engage community support workers and cultural brokers who are connected to specific cultural/linguistic communities to assist with program design and bridge between your organization and the community group.
4. Immigrant and refugee seniors appreciate spaces where they can gather for informal conversation and companionship. A comfortable space where they can have a coffee and sit and chat with others is a huge draw and may bring them into your organization where they can begin to develop relationships with service providers.
5. Provide programs and services that address day-to-day challenges faced by immigrant and refugee seniors:
  - Assistance navigating government systems
  - Orientation to life in their new city (transportation, shopping, finding a doctor, etc.) through information and field trips
  - Language programs
  - Support filling out forms such as legal forms or applications for financial support, subsidies, seniors' benefits or government programs
  - Information on financial literacy, housing, etc.

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6. Deliver more senior-friendly English language programs that are appropriate for seniors' learning pace, recognize literacy challenges in the seniors' first language, and include an opportunity to socialize and engage in conversational English.
7. Purposefully incorporate relationship-building activities into programs to facilitate the building of social networks between seniors and to help to reduce social isolation.
8. If possible, offer programs at locations which are easily accessible by transit, preferably very close to a transit stop.
9. Offer free programs whenever possible. For low-income seniors, even a small fee to participate in a program can be a barrier.
10. Create a welcoming, respectful and inclusive culture. This can be created by:
  - Hiring staff and volunteers who speak languages other than English
  - Providing training to increase knowledge of immigrant and refugee issues that will help staff and volunteers meet the needs of these seniors
  - Encouraging your members to be inclusive and respectful and to help create a welcoming environment
11. Immigrant and refugee seniors value and are more likely to act upon information received from trusted sources rather than seek out print or digital information. To promote programs, cultivate connections with formal and informal leaders within cultural/linguistic communities.
12. Review promotional materials such as newsletters and program guides for appropriate language. Avoid terminology that might be confusing for those with limited English language skills and use images and pictures to supplement written text. When possible, translate promotional material into the language of the target community.
13. Collect demographic information (e.g. country of birth, language spoken, ethnicity) and information about needs and interests to design appropriate programs and services.