

PROGRAM PROFILES

Refugee and Immigrant Connections Spokane: In the community

Kathryn Garras

Summary: This article details the programs and services offered by Refugee and Immigrant Connections Spokane, a nonprofit organization serving refugees and immigrants in the Inland Northwest.

Keywords: Refugee and Immigrant Connections; nonprofit; immigrant and refugee programs and services

Refugee and Immigrant Connections Spokane (RICS) was established in 2011 to serve refugees in the Spokane area after the initial resettlement period. The mission of RICS is to support and empower refugee and immigrant communities by providing services, fostering community bonds, and advocating for refugee and immigrant rights in the Inland Northwest. We primarily fulfill our mission through the work in our programs, which are developed based on the goals of refugee and immigrant communities.

While our programs and services have adapted to the needs of the communities over the last eleven years, a core value of connection to community has remained constant. Specifically, connection between community members, both new and established, generates mutual learning, meaningful relationships, healing, and ultimately, a richer and more resilient community.

Formerly Refugee Connections Spokane, we recently changed our name to better reflect our mission: to empower refugee and immigrant communities. While we primarily work with, and are staffed by, former refugees and immigrants who are Afghan, Congolese, Karen, Iraqi, Ukrainian, Russian, and Marshallese, we work to keep our programs open to all who are interested in participating, within our capacity and funding requirements. Due to the recent arrival of many refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine in Spokane, we anticipate continuing to serve higher numbers of individuals from these communities.

As many people in RICS programs are English Language Learners, ESL is an intentional component of several programs. We therefore ensure that our staff includes current and former TESL students who stay connected with and refer out to local ESL teachers, schools, and other resources as needed. Since RICS' primary focus is not teaching ESL, having knowledgeable program staff who are connected with the various ESL programs in the community allows us to connect program participants with additional resources that are suitable to their personal and family preferences when participants request it.

RICS Programs and Services

The bulk of RICS's work takes place within our programs, which include Refugee Elders Services, Refugee Kids Connect, Mahima Program, PRIME, Refugee and Immigrant Stories: Voices of Hope, Welcome to Spokane, Patient Passports, the annual World Refugee Day celebration, which RICS organizes, and our brand new Refugee and Immigrant Wellness program.



Image 1: Friends chat at World Refugee Day, 2016

Refugee Elder Services

Refugee Elder Services, one of RICS's longest-standing programs, is for refugees ages 60 and older who have been in the United States less than five years. Ultimately, the goal is to support refugee elders in their pursuit of United States citizenship. The activities offered to participants include ESL classes, citizenship classes, elder social groups, and community outings that are enjoyable and complement the ESL curriculum, which is unique to RICS' program.

Several years ago, RICS partnered with two local ESL teachers, Kendra Grabowski and Mary Goodrich, to lead the Elders ESL classes. Finding very few materials and resources tailored to supporting elder refugee students prompted them to design the ESL curriculum that is still taught by Kendra today. On [their website](#) dedicated to the curriculum, they

explain that it “emphasizes functional language skills, provides opportunities for interaction among the elders, and finally, gives students opportunities to practice skills that will give them the best chance of thriving in their new communities” through lessons that have “been tailored with this group’s specific strengths and challenges in mind.” More information about the curriculum and access to lesson materials can be found on their site.

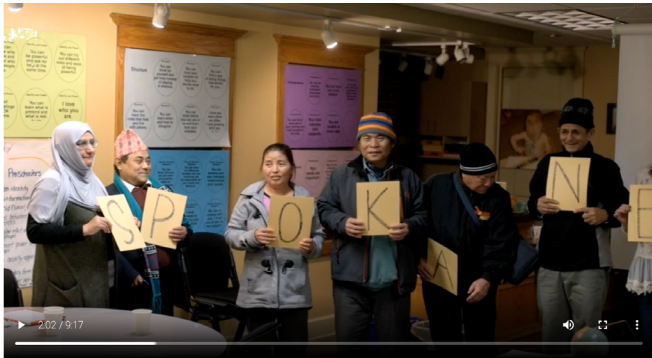


Image 2: Elders taking part in The Refugee Elders Services program.

RICS will also be rolling out a technology program in coming months so those who are not able or interested in meeting in person have the option to meaningfully participate in program activities that connect them with other community members. Participants will receive a tablet to keep, access to loaner hotspots, and relevant technical training.

A key to the success of the Refugee Elders program is RICS’s Cross-Cultural Navigator staff, who speak the primary language of the clients and are originally from the same region of the world. Staff help bridge language barriers and navigate



Image 3: Kids Connect participants work together on a word search during a “mystery” themed week during the summer for 2021.

cultural differences, which leads to effective communication and a comfortable experience for program participants.

Refugee Kids Connect

Refugee Kids Connect, a program started by a volunteer in 2017, offers activities for local students from families of refugees or immigrants. The program, which is open to students ages 5–18, meets four days each week after school and during the summer. Staff adapt the curriculum to cater activities to each child’s age, interests, and skill level. Program participants build social-emotional skills, practice goal setting, build friendships, and practice English through activities with an arts, academic, sports, or outdoors focus. Program participants have a wide range of English language proficiency; since 2021, local university TESL students on staff began to incorporate language learning tools into the curriculum.

Other Programs and Services

RICS offers several other programs and services. For example, The Patient Passports program is a language access program that supports effective communication in medical settings. The Patient Passport itself is a small booklet in English and the preferred language of the user; it includes all relevant personal and health information that a medical provider might need to safely treat an individual, filled out with the help of an interpreter. Additionally, we are currently working on a storytelling project called Refugee and Immigrant Stories: Voices of Hope that shares the experiences of our newest neighbors from Afghanistan in short videos. The Mahima Program, a women-centered and former refugee-led program, helps former refugees overcome trauma and become resilient, which helps to empower and equip them to thrive in the US. Other key programs include the PRIME Program, which promotes the self-sufficiency of recently arrived refugees after their initial resettlement through case management and short-term services. Under development, Refugee and Immigrant Wellness will support the overall health of program participants in culturally appropriate ways, addressing emotional and social health, and healing from trauma. Also under development, the Welcome to Spokane orientation program will provide a resource and activity manual; participating families will also be taken on a guided city tour so that they can feel more grounded within their new community. While goals vary among programs, connection to community remains at the heart of each.

Conclusion

Though RICS has expanded who and how we serve since we were established, we remain rooted in our founding vision: working to fill gaps that exist after the initial refugee and immigrant resettlement period while also building lasting relationships among community members.

To learn more about our programs and activities, please visit [our new website](#).

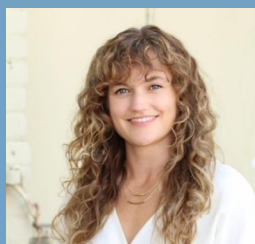
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