

CENTER FOR NEW AMERICANS

Low-tech touch: Center for New Americans helps refugees adapt to their new home

BY JOSIE ALBERTSON-GROVE



Sometimes, innovative thinking means going low-tech.

When leaders at the Center for New Americans in Manchester think about how to help refugees and immigrants reach their full potential in New Hampshire, their strategies are simple and time-worn. Meet people where they live. Build relationships by talking in-person. Make sure needs like food and child care are met. Co-locate programs to minimize transportation hassles for busy families.

The center opened in 2017 to help new arrivals in Manchester learn English, and provide coaching and mentoring as immigrants and refugees chart their courses for education and careers in the United States.

Steve Thiel, assistant vice president of community impact for Southern New Hampshire University, and one of the drivers of the Center for New Americans, calls the center's work "barrier-removing programming."

"These parents have risked a lot to find a better place for their kids," Thiel said. "They need to be able to learn English without worrying who will take care of their children."

Programs for the whole family at the center mean adults can take an English class and get help working toward a high school equivalency diploma, while their children are also learning English and getting help with school work.

The center grew out of SNHU's work bringing their online degree programs to refugee camps. University president Paul LeBlanc wanted to find a way to keep working with refugees who were

resettled in Manchester, and with immigrants arriving in the city.

"Let's take a look at Manchester's landscape and see what role we might play," Thiel said. The university partnered with the YWCA, which was also working to connect with new arrivals in Manchester. The Center for New Americans opened in a renovated space in the YWCA building near downtown Manchester in 2017.

About 300 adults and children have used the center's programs – which Thiel said the center staff work to tailor to individuals' needs as much as possible.

"Those needs are as diverse as the populations that we're talking about," Thiel said.

Education levels among refugees and immigrants vary, Thiel said – some arrive having completed advanced degrees in their home country, while others never got the opportunity to read and write in their native tongue.

The goals of refugees and immigrants are also different – some just want to learn conversational English, enough to get along, while others are interested in academic English to support their goals of higher education.

Ideally, Thiel said, new arrivals can gain access to the center's programs soon after they come to Manchester.

"We don't do this work alone," Thiel said.

"We value the significant relationships we have with community leaders in the Congolese community and Bhutanese community," Thiel said. "We get to know a lot of those

folks and ask for their counsel and partnership.

Of course, 2020 was a year unlike any other, and the center had to adapt. The in-person programs had to be suspended, the sometimes-cramped van to shuttle between the center and people's homes was no longer safe. "A lot of our early efforts were calling and texting families, doing wellness checks," Thiel said.

One of the families the center worked with was Esayu Behaymont's, who came to Manchester from Eritrea five years ago. His wife, Lidya, joined him a few years later.

After a refugee resettlement agency helped with the family's initial needs, the Center for New Americans has kept in touch with the family, connecting them with English classes, and with a caseworker who could make sure they had what they needed to thrive in Manchester.

Behaymont said contact with the case worker was critical

during the pandemic, making sure the family had warm clothes, food, diapers for their new baby.

"She helped us a lot. Everything that we need – we asked her, she came," Behaymont said.

Center staff and volunteers visited families on their porches to ask how they were, what issues they had encountered, what help did they need. They brought food, formula and diapers for families with babies, feminine hygiene products, laundry supplies.

The center staff and volunteers helped connect families to the internet and helped pay bills. They translated information about remote learning, COVID-19 protocols, and information about aid programs.

"As with any crisis, the silver lining is that we were really closely in touch with a lot of our families," Thiel said.

"I don't think we've perfected this model yet, but I think every year we've gotten a little better and a little closer to the goal that we're shooting for."



OPPOSITE PAGE: Stephen Thiel, assistant vice president of social impact and community relations, holds rice and diapers – supplies for immigrants from the Community Closet in the Center for New Americans room at the YWCA in Manchester. **ABOVE:** Thiel standing in the Center for New Americans room at the YWCA in Manchester.