

Chicago immigrant advocates increase mental health outreach for refugees with PTSD

Zippering her bag full of informational flyers after a two-hour mental health presentation to about 30 Middle Eastern refugee women on Sept. 30, Ekram Hanna said she felt a tap on her shoulder from a woman who attended the Edgewater event.

“Please don’t stop doing this,” the woman whispered to Hanna in Arabic.

Hanna, the director of development at the Middle Eastern Immigrant and Refugee Alliance, started a mental health program for Arabic-speaking refugees in Rogers Park, Edgewater and Uptown in 2019.

She said she wanted to support refugee women seeking one-on-one counseling for PTSD at MIRA for the first time.

“They were just scared before, and I just believe people cannot do it themselves,” she said.

Chicago experienced an influx of over 50,000 immigrants from Asian, Latin American and African countries starting in August 2022, according to the city's New Arrivals Situational Awareness Dashboard. Many were transported in buses or airplanes from Texas as part of Gov. Greg Abbott’s plan to send migrants and refugees to northern cities.

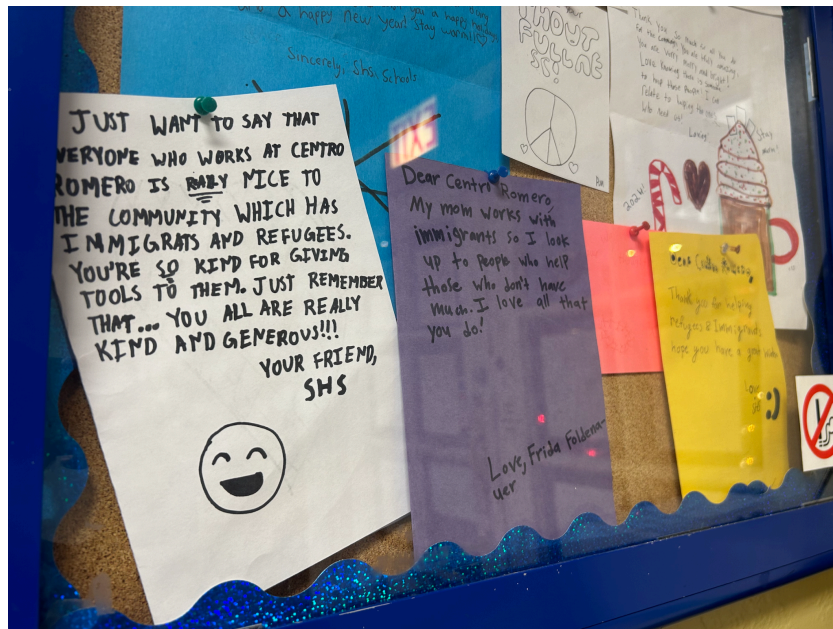
Hanna said refugees were looking for trauma support more often in the past year than when they first arrived in the city, an observation that mimics a broader national trend, about 40% of adult refugees seeking mental health treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder in the last two years, according to the Refugee Health Technical Assistance Center.

Hanna said some clients still hesitated to seek PTSD treatment because of a cultural stigma against showing emotion in the Middle East.

“They might leave their lives behind, but they take their culture with them when they come to this country,” she said.

Mayor Brandon Johnson worked with nonprofit initiatives to provide physical and mental health resources for new refugees, 60% of whom have immigrated from Venezuela over the past two years.

Patricia Bakle, who heads the women’s program at Centro Romero in Edgewater, said she noticed women were more open to conversations about mental health than male refugees.



Multicolored handwritten letters to Centro Romero employees are pinned to a bulletin board preserved in a glass case in the front desk area of the immigrant resource center’s building on Nov. 11, 2024. Centro Romero is located at 6216 N. Clark St. in Edgewater.
(Medill Reports/Anneliese Cornejo Garcia)

Local organizations also worked with the city to establish New Arrivals Shelters, buildings in various neighborhoods that were converted into places for new migrants to live.

Social worker and CEO of Rincon Family Services Eddy Borrayo has volunteered at the American Islamic College New Arrivals Shelter at North Marine Drive and West Irving Park Road in Uptown since July 2023.

Borrayo said he and his team worked with some Venezuelan refugees with PTSD who developed substance abuse disorders while adjusting to a new city.

“A lot of them see counseling or therapy as another burden. We needed to be there to change that,” he said.

Borrayo said some Venezuelan refugees also turned to each other for support.

“Where a lot of people would have assumed it was not the best situation for them, they kept smiling because they had each other,” he said.

###