



Community Impact

Community Navigators and Program leaders innovate to serve as a beacon of hope, amid crisis, for immigrants and refugees in our community.

Last Friday, our Community Navigator, Durga Subedi, received a call from a couple in Reynoldsburg, OH. The couple, both in their early sixties, had separated themselves from their children, self-quarantining due to the husband's symptoms of the COVID-19 virus. As the fever, cough, chest pains, fatigue, and other symptoms set in, he began to share with his family his bank account information and details of his property back in Nepal, feeling as though his death was imminent. He talked to his sons about distributing his property equally among all his children and, most importantly, about taking care of his wife, their mother, when he was gone.

As hopelessness began to set in, he made a serendipitous call to a relative in Syracuse, New York. That friend, in turn, called someone who had watched Durga's COVID-19 informational video that she had created in Nepali, to be shared through all the ETSS social media channels. This video provided him with Durga's community contact number, a unique number that each of our community navigators has in order to provide continued bilingual support to our communities.

On Friday, the man's wife called Durga. Fighting tears, she told Durga that she feared they would die alone in their apartment, and no one would know until the landlord followed up on their missed rent payment. "It broke my heart," Durga said.

Durga did all she could do to ease the woman's mind and reassured her that she could connect her with help. The woman became more at ease as Durga told her about the large Bhutanese/Nepali community in Columbus, Ohio and their "big hearts." Durga provided her with the Columbus Connection BRAVE Help-line number and ensured her that a Nepali speaking person would answer the phone. She also called the BRAVE line on their behalf to make sure that they were receiving the help they needed. She was very happy to hear the plan they had in place to help the Bhutanese/Nepali community.

That Saturday, Durga exchanged over 10 phone calls with the family and the helpline. While there were still no answers on whether the man was positive for COVID-19, the families minds were much more at ease. On Sunday, a Nepali doctor was able to contact the family to provide essential information, including the importance of staying home.

Durga checked with the man Monday morning. He thanked her for keeping him alive. "If I wouldn't have gotten help and support from people like you in our community, I might have died from anxiety and stress". He said he still has the symptoms, but "with the hope you all have given, I know I will be able to fight with my sickness." Nobody knows whether he has COVID-19 but he is treating it like he does and self-quarantining.

As the impact of COVID-19 broadens, the fear and anxiety of the pandemic has spared few people. The impact increases exponentially when compounding variables such as language and scarcity of information exacerbate the impact on our New American families. Our community navigators become increasingly important to the physical and mental well-being of the communities we support. They are reaching out and ensuring that information is distributed to those that it may not otherwise reach. Information that keeps those communities safe, as well as the rest of the country.

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Over the last 15 years, ETSS has been a hands-on organization, deeply immersed in the refugee and immigrant communities it serves across Central Ohio. Our programs and services, designed to address the issues and challenges faced by these vulnerable populations, have grown and changed as needs and demand have dictated. This has never been more true than during the current COVID -19 pandemic. Here are a few examples of how, even under the mandated Stay-At-Home order, ETSS continues to serve vulnerable immigrant and refugee families in creative, innovate and effective ways.

Ram Upeti

As the Site Coordinator for our northside location, Ram continually reaches out to support the needs of the primarily Bhutanese-Nepali population in the Morse/Karl Road area of Columbus. Dealing with COVID-19 is stressful for all of us, but it is particularly difficult for those who have gone through traumatic experiences in the past that often trigger anxiety and trauma in the present. Over the last couple of weeks Ram has sought to be compassionate, supportive and instrumental in comforting families who have experienced pain through the death of a loved one, housing issues, food insecurity, lack of supplies to help ensure safe conditions within the home or understating the elements of the mandates from the Ohio Department of Health such as social distancing and stay at home. His kindness and patience have helped these families be safer and more at ease in these very challenging times.

Guy Tshimanga

Guy works as a Community Mental Health Navigator for ETSS. Guy, speaking several languages, is uniquely capable of offering comfort and support to many of the newer refugees and immigrants, especially those from the Congo. Many from this group have no support system or family in Central Ohio and many have little understanding of how to access or use social services that are available. This is where Guy has devoted his time, providing emotional encouragement and information, linkages and personal understanding of the many overwhelming challenges faced by the Congolese and other nationalities. Guy is also instrumental in facilitating the assessment of physical and mental health needs of these populations. During a time of social distancing and raised awareness of prevention, Guy has continued to reach deeply into these communities to help them understand what they need to do to stay safe and healthy and to help them receive the services they need, whether food, shelter, medical or emotional health or financial stability.

Jennifer Drury & Lilu Terefe

There are over 1400 young people who participate in programs at ETSS annually through afterschool academic and cultural enrichment support, to summer camp, field trips or internships, work experience and post-graduate preparedness. It was very challenging to figure out how we would continue to support our students following the mandated school closings due to COVID-19. However, through the efforts of the Youth Department, including Jennifer and Lilu, we are now able, through work with regional school districts and other partners, to provide a new ETSS Online Afterschool Program from 2pm-6pm daily for grades K-12 including academic support, SEL, Health and Wellness, cultural enrichment, and parent engagement. As challenging as this pandemic is, it is inspiring innovation that provides excellence and options to reach our students in even more ways.