

Office of Refugee Resettlement Refugee Program Employment and Economic Stability Promising Practice



Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area Community Interpreter Program

In 2019, Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA) in Hyattsville, MD, launched its Community Interpreter Program to expand its language services capacity, improve staff operations, and reduce administrative costs. LSSNCA recruits, trains, and contracts with former clients to begin working as paid community interpreters for the agency.



Practice Description

LSSNCA implemented the Community Interpreter Program as a cost-effective solution to meet their clients' language needs. LSSNCA recruits former clients to become trained interpreters. Interpreters are required to complete training designed to equip them with proper interpreting techniques, knowledge about an interpreter's role and scope of practice, and tools to handle various situations. After the training, interpreters must complete a 20-hour practicum that provides opportunities to apply what they have learned in the training session, expand their knowledge, and further develop their newly acquired skills. Upon completion of the practicum, interpreters sign an independent contractor agreement to provide interpretation services during client trainings and workshops (e.g., job readiness training, cultural orientation, transportation training).



Need for the Practice

An LSSNCA staff member, who had prior experience as an interpreter, noticed that agency staff with certain language skills were regularly being called upon to provide interpretation services, often taking time away from their regular job duties. Moreover, the administrative costs associated with using an outside vendor for interpretation services were high. Implementing community-based language services could save staff time and lower expenses.



How to Implement the Practice

LSSNCA described the following key steps to implement this practice:

- Conduct outreach to recruit potential interpreters and offer information sessions to provide program details.
- Determine how community interpreters will be used. LSSNCA's program supports agency trainings, orientations, and workshops that are scheduled in advance and do not involve interpretation of client personal and confidential information. (Note: the agency uses a vendor to interpret during home visits, medical appointments, or other meetings that may include sensitive client information.)
- Establish selection criteria. LSSNCA requires community interpreters to at least be bilingual, have language proficiency in their working languages, and be former clients of the agency.
- Administer assessments to test language proficiency.
- Develop a training curriculum. LSSNCA requires participants to complete a full day of training and a 20-hour practicum. The agency uses a training curriculum¹ that is hands on, requiring role play scenarios that enable participants to apply and practice new skills.
- Upon completion of the training and practicum, participants are eligible to become paid community interpreters for the agency. Participants sign an independent contract agreement that specifies the pay rate and outlines the scope of work.
- Provide community interpreters with materials in advance of the scheduled trainings so that they are familiar with the training content.
- Ensure a diverse pool of community interpreters to enable filtering for gender and language preferences if needed.
- Appoint an agency staff member or volunteer to oversee the program.



Preliminary Results

LSSNCA provided output data used to inform changes to and measure the effectiveness of this practice. A specific example includes:

- LSSNCA reports a cost savings of roughly \$6,000 since the program started in 2019. Implementing the Community Interpreter Program eliminated LSSNCA having to pay overhead costs to a third-party vendor since community interpreters are paid an hourly rate directly. Prior to the implementation of this practice, the agency was paying twice as much for these services.

¹ LSSNCA used The Community Interpreter book to develop the curriculum.



Inputs/Resources

Agencies should expect to invest some funding and time to implement this practice. Below are key inputs and resources needed to adopt this practice.

- Interested individuals who are, at a minimum, bilingual and have language proficiency in their working languages.
- Technology to include, but not limited to, an online scheduling system and a database to manage the language bank.
- Structured training curriculum and experienced trainers who bring their expertise and real-life experiences into the classroom. Training should also include an investment in resource materials to support ongoing learning and professional development.
- Evaluation tools to assess the effectiveness of this practice.
- Agency staff and/or volunteers to oversee the program.
- Funding to cover expenses for training supplies and the resources needed to support interpreters.



Contextual Considerations

Agencies should consider the following contextual factors that may impact implementing this practice.

LSSNCA's first training class consisted of 10 males and only one female. Recognizing that there are some situations in which clients may prefer a female interpreter, LSSNCA intentionally recruited five females to participate in their second training class. Moving forward, the agency aims to ensure half of the class participants are female.

Being a community interpreter for the agency is part-time work, so having multiple people who speak the same language helps to ensure someone is available when needed. The pool of potential interpreters will determine how long it takes to build a language bank that meets an agency's needs. Since 2019, LSSNCA has trained 20 individuals, with nine having completed the practicum and serving as paid interpreters. Currently, interpretation is available in eight languages; however, the goal is to have more than 12 languages and dialects represented in their language bank.

What is a Promising Practice? A promising practice is a unique and/or innovative approach, method, or technique that has demonstrated effectiveness and is replicable. ORR's Refugee Program primarily identifies potential promising practices during recipient and subrecipient monitoring and engages in a validation process to ensure the practice meets the standards to classify it as "promising." Each practice falls under one of the following domains: Physical and Behavioral Health, Employment and Economic Stability, Education and English Language, or Social Adjustment and Integration.