

**Henrico County Refugee Mental Health Referral System**  
**By: Eva P. Stitt, Refugee Mental Health Analyst**

The Virginia Refugee Mental Health Initiative was launched in 2013 with the primary goal of establishing a self-sustaining system in different localities across the state so that refugees with mental health needs can access care. Led by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, this initiative has two components: The refugee mental health council that oversees the initiative, and the refugee referral system - an organized group of providers where refugees with mental health issues can access care.

Who is a refugee? What makes a refugee different from an immigrant? The United Nations defines a refugee as “ someone who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” On the other hand, an immigrant is defined by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services as “An alien admitted to the United States as a lawful permanent resident.” Unlike immigrants, who left their homes with much preparation and goodbyes, refugees didn’t have time to prepare – they merely wanted to escape and save their lives, leaving everything behind. Unlike immigrants who intentionally choose to live in America, refugees simply went to the next country for safety, and by luck were approved for 3<sup>rd</sup> country relocation to the United States. Unlike immigrants who can return at will, refugees may not be able to safely return to their homeland. Unlike many immigrants who learned English and American culture prior to relocation, many refugees came with little to limited English proficiency and very little clue about real life in the United States. Unlike immigrants who lived life under normal circumstances, refugees lived with scars of trauma from war, massacre, death of loved one, violence, rape, persecution, and more. Therefore, refugees need more support to get established than immigrants.

Henrico County is one of the localities where a refugee mental health initiative exists with core support from two refugee resettlement agencies - Church World Service and Commonwealth Catholic Charities, the Henrico Health Department, and the Henrico County Community Services Board. The referral system starts with a refugee mental health screening offered at the Henrico Health Department. Using a refugee-validated tool known as Refugee Health Screener 15 or RHS-15, the result is highly predictive for mental health risk. If screened positive, the client is referred to the Henrico County Community Services Board for further evaluation. Upon identification of a specific mental health issue, the client can be treated at Henrico CSB if the care needed is within the services the agency offers. If not, the client will be referred to private providers. Screening, referral, or treatment is voluntary, and the client can opt to stop at any point.

Front and center of this initiative are the medical liaisons hired by the Department of Health, Office of Newcomer Services and assigned at the different resettlement agencies. Their greatest challenge is to find providers (doctors, counselors, therapists, psychologists, etc) who are willing to take refugee clients who do not speak or have limited English communication skills, many have Medicaid for 8 months only and sometimes not available at the time of the call, are not familiar with Western bio-medical approach, and have no personal transportation but rely only on public bus services. Unfortunately, there are not many providers who are willing to take care of refugee clients. With an established referral system, many of the barriers to access care have been addressed. Several community partners are involved including private providers, non-profit organizations, public and private agencies, and interested individuals. "The mental health referral system helped me in my work as medical liaison. When the client is positive in the mental health screening at the health department or at CSB, I get notice. Having a list of behavioral health providers who we have established contact through the mental health council makes the referral process faster and the client receives access to care." said Laxman Chamlagai.