



# Healthy Together: Creating Community with New U.S. Americans

A Summary of Interviews with  
Community Leaders and Outreach Workers

Bloomington Public Health  
April 2009

**Healthy Together: Creating Community with new U.S. Americans**  
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*“Healthy Communities have strong social networks and support systems that bond people together. Social connectedness is especially important to the mental and healthy social adjustment of new Americans.” - Creating the foundation for healthier communities, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation website*

## **Overview**

During January – February 2009, 17 interviews were conducted with 21 staff and volunteers working in city departments, schools, faith and community organizations, and workplaces in Bloomington and Richfield. Healthy Together New U.S. Americans Leadership Advisory Team members identified community organizations and representatives that work with many new Americans (Appendix A: Roster of Healthy Together Leadership Team). A common set of questions was asked. A graduate student from the University of Minnesota and Bloomington Public Health staff conducted the interviews. For this report, the term “new U.S. Americans” and “newcomers” are used interchangeably.

The purpose of the interviews was to:

1. Identify what local resources and programs are available for newcomers.
2. Understand perspectives of various community sectors and newcomers about the barriers, experiences, needs and opportunities of newcomers.
3. Gather ideas about how to improve health and social integration of newcomers in Bloomington and Richfield.

Several categories of new U.S. Americans live in our communities including refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, parolees, undocumented workers, and people who have been given short-term visas. It is difficult to try to make a lot of generalizations about newcomers’ experiences in adjusting to life here in the U.S. Many factors impact health and social adjustment including immigration status, education and professional training, religious and cultural background.

This project was supported by a one-year planning grant called “Healthy Together: Creating Community with new Americans”, funded by Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation of Minnesota and awarded to Bloomington Public Health. The overall grant goal is to identify ways to improve health and reduce health inequities for new U.S. Americans by building social connectedness between newcomers and the broader communities of Richfield and Bloomington.

## Interview Questions and Summary

Healthy Together Leadership Team developed the following questions for the interviews.

### **Who are the main cultural or ethnic populations living in our communities?**

The primary cultural and ethnic groups living in Bloomington and Richfield are mostly from Mexico, Somalia and other African countries, Asia and Russia. Many individuals and families coming from African countries are political refugees.

### **How do schools, city and community organizations serve new U.S. Americans?**

#### *Schools and Normandale Community College*

Schools are an important community entry point because many newcomers are families with children. Adults often enroll in English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) programs at South Hennepin Adult Programs in Education (SHAPE). Classes are held in community sites in Richfield, Bloomington, Edina and Eden Prairie.

Schools have programs to help newcomers learn about the school system and help support the student's academic success. Examples include a summer 6-week Welcome and Registration program in Richfield, family and parenting nights (e.g. Latino parents), and Homework Connections. Homework Connections is a partnership between Bloomington Public Schools, faith-based and other organizations that provide tutoring help for students who are struggling academically. Many new U.S. American students also attend Partnership Academy, a charter school in Richfield.

Bloomington and Richfield Public Schools have hired school cultural liaisons to help new students and families. Bloomington Public Schools leadership staff are leading the "We Believe" initiative, a school and community collaboration to reduce academic disparities in the school district. English Language Learner (ELL) programs are available to students. Early Childhood Programs also offer parenting programs to newcomers.

Normandale Community College employs a Director of Multicultural Services to help create greater access to higher education by students of color. Programs and services (e.g. E.S.L.) are provided on location.

#### *City Departments*

Bloomington Public Health has experienced a dramatic increase in new U.S. Americans using public health services. Spanish interpreters have been hired. Bloomington's Human Services department has an "Ask the City" phone line to answer residents' calls about available community resources. The City offers interpreters' services and has translated service materials into other languages. In partnership with local faith-based organizations and the schools, the City has sponsored cross-cultural dialogues and sponsored a Youth Leadership Summit, which is cross-cultural youth training.

Because of the interest in soccer by Latinos, more soccer leagues have been organized by Richfield's Park and Recreation department for youth and adults. The City of Richfield also has a Multicultural Advisory Committee.

### *Community Organizations*

There are few ethnic or culturally specific organizations in Bloomington and Richfield, with the exception of LaMision and Family Multicultural Resource Center in Richfield. These centers were established to help Latinos find resources, offer health and legal services, education and recreational programs in collaboration with other agencies. Family Multicultural Resource Center/MIRA of Richfield plans to expand its programs to serve people from Somalia when more funding becomes available.

The local Hennepin County libraries provide valuable community resources to many newcomers and their families. Computer classes, family story time, and cross-cultural events are provided by area libraries. African, Latino, and Asian outreach workers have been hired to help these communities identify needs and access library services and programs.

Non-profit organizations such as Volunteers Enlisted to Assist People (VEAP) and Storefront are responding to the changing demographics and needs in our communities. VEAP has hired social workers and Storefront has expanded mental health programs services to help newcomer families. There are increasing demands for food, crisis counseling, low cost housing, job training, and public transportation.

### *Faith-Based Organizations*

As new U.S. American families move into communities, many look for a congregation or religious center with people of the same faith. In Richfield, Assumption Catholic Church conducts worship services in Spanish. Other churches share facilities with new faith communities that are predominantly families from another country. The Muslim Community Center in Bloomington was built a few years ago and serves a growing number of newcomers from over 60 different countries.

Faith communities are reaching out in many ways to newcomers by sponsoring interfaith dialogues and meals, hosting E.S.L. classes, and supporting community non-profit organizations that serve many newcomers (e.g. VEAP). One west Bloomington church developed a mission partnership with an east Bloomington apartment complex. Assumption Catholic Church supports a resource center, LaMision, for Latino families. Medical professionals from the Muslim Community Center started the Cedar Avenue Clinic and provide free medical consultation to the public; most of their clients are newcomers to this country.

### *Worksites*

Many newcomers work at local hotels, restaurants, retail stores, assembly plants, and taxi companies. Some employers sponsor E.S.L. classes; others host basic Spanish language classes for employees.

## **How do new U.S. Americans find out about local programs and services?**

*Word of mouth.* This was identified as the main way the Somalis and Latinos learn about programs and services, particularly in places of worship.

*Schools.* Since many new U.S. American families have children in schools, school communication channels are an important source of information about local activities. School liaisons, school registration, parent nights (e.g. Latino parenting group), and school events are effective ways of reaching newcomers' families.

*Referrals and information made by staff or volunteers who provide services to newcomers.* Organizational staff tell newcomers about available resources from other community organizations.

*Resource Centers* such as LaMision and the Family Multicultural Resource Centers/MIRA in Richfield.

*Outreach workers.* Cultural outreach workers are an important link between specific cultural communities and the school or organization they work at.

*Flyers and ads.* Somewhat effective strategy when placed in organizations where newcomers frequent. More effective if cultural liaisons and outreach workers highlight these with newcomers.

*Public access TV.* This is an effective means of reaching certain cultural groups where there is an established viewer base (e.g. Somali TV in Minneapolis).

*Phone information lines and internet sites.* For most newcomers with limited English skills, requesting help or information on the phone is intimidating so they avoid it. Many do not have computer skills or access to the computer so this is not seen as a helpful tool.

## **What are the main barriers new U.S. Americans face in adjusting to life here?**

Many barriers were identified in the interviews, the most common listed below.

*Learning the English language.*

This is particularly challenging for some groups of newcomers because they come from countries where little formal education has been available. For others, learning English is challenging because the language is so different from their native language.

*Adjusting to American culture while trying to maintain one's own religious and cultural traditions.*

Newcomers state that "the U.S. culture is very open" compared to cultures where kinship, traditional cultural practices and religion have much more influence on individual and social behavior, gender roles, work opportunities, status in community and daily life. This is particularly true for new Americans coming from Muslim countries with theocratic governments.

*Finding resources and learning to navigate unfamiliar American schools, health care, transportation and other systems.*

Many newcomers have said that they have “no idea how to access services” and the “systems are not user friendly”. Accessing services is time consuming and cumbersome since there are many required documents and paperwork to complete before services are available. Once services have been authorized, newcomers must learn to navigate unfamiliar systems, often further challenged by limited English language skills. For example, many newcomers’ families find the American school system completely different than in their native country, ranging from the physical structure of schools to the school’s expectations of parents and students.

*Transportation is also a major challenge for many newcomers.*

Many cannot afford to buy a car and spend much time trying to arrange rides or figure out if public transportation can get them to their destination. Undocumented workers cannot get a driver’s license. Public transportation in the suburbs is very limited. Many newcomers bike to work. Walking was also the main mode of transportation in their country. However, as one interviewee commented, “In our communities, sidewalks are often lacking or unplowed. The streets are not safe to bike on”.

*Staying healthy and getting affordable health care.*

Many newcomers come from countries where people grow their own food or buy fresh food at local markets. Because of the fast-paced American lifestyle, lack of time for meal preparation, and lack of accessible and affordable fresh food, families find they rely more on fast and convenient foods. They have less time to enjoy traditional family meals. Becoming fat or being overweight is a big concern.

The majority of newcomers have not experienced the complexities of the U.S. health care system. Many newcomers have jobs that do not include health insurance, and many newcomers go uninsured, especially Latino families. Somali’s have no previous experience with obtaining health insurance since there is no health insurance system in their native country. Newcomers find health care very expensive here and some choose to go back to their country for medical procedures, such as surgeries. Health beliefs and practices often are quite different than Western medicine. In some cultures the use of healers (non-medically trained people) and spiritual leaders are widely used to help people with different ailments. With these cross-cultural differences, there are often fears, mistrust and misunderstandings about medical procedures and treatments commonly used here.

*Job and Economic challenges.*

Employment is often difficult to obtain and many newcomers work more than one job to make ends meet. Getting employment in newcomers’ professional fields or trades may be a challenge because of different training and educational requirements between their native country and the U.S. Many professionals find it necessary to go back to college.

*Lack of community connectedness.*

Public health nurses and health professionals noted that family elders and stay-at-home mothers with babies and small children often feel isolated and depressed. Few community programs are available for these groups and transportation is often a barrier.

**What strategies do you find work best in helping newcomers feel welcome in your organization?**

- Bilingual staff and volunteers, including first generation Americans, help overcome language and cultural barriers.
- Staff and volunteers that understand newcomers' issues, are culturally competent and have a welcoming attitude.
- Actively engaging newcomers in their organization in meaningful ways, such as in management or volunteer leadership positions.
- Make accommodations to programs and facilities to encourage attendance (e.g., allow children to attend with parents, provide childcare and food, make space available for prayer, provide transportation).
- Host welcome and registration programs at school that help newcomer families learn about the school system and what resources are available in the community; use bilingual staff and outreach workers.
- Translate materials in different languages.

**People are healthiest when they feel safe, supported and connected to their families, neighborhoods, workplaces and communities. What things do you think help new U.S. Americans feel connected to their communities?**

- Knowing where to find community resources and programs.
- Community events and school programs that bring diverse people together, such as National Night Out, local Farmers Markets, Dia del Nino, Dia del Libro/Day of the Child, Day of the Book event (Richfield), and the Youth Leadership Summit (Bloomington).
- Recreational programs designed with newcomers in mind (e.g. world music summer concert programs, spaces in parks for families to gather, Latino soccer programs).
- “Family-centered” programs and events rather than separate child and parent programs.
- Newcomers have opportunities for job advancement in their workplaces and there are opportunities for volunteer involvement in city and community organizations.
- Volunteer recognition programs include the contributions of newcomers.

*“When new U.S. Americans begin to learn English and the American culture, they began to understand and feel a part of their community. When (established) Americans take the time to learn about the culture and traditions of new Americans, people begin to see the ways they are alike while appreciating the ways they are different.” - SHAPE staff*

**The following ideas were suggested as ways to facilitate the integration process of new U.S. Americans. What are your thoughts about these ideas? Do you have other suggestions?**

*Establish a Welcome and Resource Center or Program* where newcomers can get information on housing, transportation, health care, career planning and jobs, programs and services for families. Educational and cross-cultural programs might also be included.

### Bloomington

Bloomington does not have a newcomer welcome or resource center or program. Interviewees felt strongly that some type of welcome center or program is needed in Bloomington. Several stated that finding local resources for newcomer families can be overwhelming not only for the families but for school and community staff trying to help them.

The following models were discussed.

1. *Welcome and Resource Center located at an accessible site in Bloomington, a “one-stop” shop.* Center would welcome all newcomers and be inclusive of all cultures. The Center’s location should be on a bus route, requires a staff coordinator and additional bilingual staff and volunteers. Organizations or services could be co-located in the Welcome and Resource Center, specifically those who provide essential services to newcomers (e.g. government health insurance, human services, public health services, and E.S.L classes).
2. *Welcome and Resource Program would be a mobile resource unit with information about community services and programs.* Unit could be moved to different events such as school registrations, libraries, Farmers Markets, faith community worship services, and used by organizations. It would require a coordinator and bilingual staff and volunteers.

### Richfield

Richfield has two organizations that serve as welcome and resource centers. Family Multicultural Resource Center/MIRA and LaMision primarily serve Latino individuals and families. The Family Multicultural Resource Center/MIRA hopes to expand its scope and also serve Somali families. Both organizations are challenged by the increasing demand for services and the lack of funding. These organizations serve many residents from Richfield, Bloomington and other communities. Partnerships have been formed with other school and community organizations, such as Richfield Public Schools, SHAPE, Bloomington Public Health, Hennepin County libraries and others to provide E.S.L. and parenting classes, public health services, health insurance and legal assistance.

***Organize a South Hennepin County New U.S. Americans provider group for networking and resource sharing.***

There was mixed reaction to this idea. Some thought it was a good idea, while others did not want to spend more time in meetings. Although networking and resource sharing were deemed important, some thought the goals were too limited and narrow. Others thought they knew enough about what resources are available in the community. It was suggested that the Hennepin South Services Collaborative may already serve this role in some capacity.

***Sponsor “talking circles” or cross-cultural exchanges or events that include newcomers and native born Americans.***

Those interviewed believe this is a valuable strategy, although organizing and recruiting people to attend “talking circles” or cross-cultural exchanges can be challenging. Interviewees noted several existing successful events, programs, and community activities that promote cross-cultural exchanges. It was suggested that we continue to support and expand the scope of activities and promotion these events or programs.

*Dia del Nino, Dia del Libro/Day of the Child, Day of the Book*, an annual Richfield event sponsored by LaMision, Hennepin County Libraries and others community organizations.

*Bloomington Youth Leadership Summit* sponsored by Bloomington Human Services, Human Rights Committee and Bloomington Public Schools that brings together students from diverse cultural backgrounds for leadership training.

*Community Interfaith Dialogues* sponsored by Bloomington congregations and the Muslim Community Center can help people of diverse cultures and religions learn from each other.

*Farmers Markets* provide opportunities for new Americans and native born Americans to interact. On-site events, concerts, and resource information centers can create opportunities for more cross-cultural exchanges and learning.

*Conversation circles* on different topics at SHAPE between students and volunteers have been effective in increased cross-cultural knowledge and understanding.

*National Night Out* provides a great opportunity to get to know new neighbors and taste new foods.

*School and community organizations* partnering during new student registration can help new families learn about community resources.

*Hennepin County Libraries* provide cross-cultural programs at different libraries in Richfield and Bloomington.

***Develop website with local resources and information for newcomers***

This strategy had mixed reviews because many newcomers lack access to computers. Some resource lists are already available on the internet, such as Hennepin South Services Collaborative, library websites and other places. If a website were to be developed it was suggested that it be for youth or organizations serving new U.S. Americans.

***Conduct additional research related to needs and assets of new U.S. Americans***

Those interviewed said there is a fair amount of research that has already been conducted about newcomers. There is a need to effectively and efficiently disseminate current research studies.

*For more information*, contact Eileen O'Connell, Bloomington Public Health, at 952-563-4964 or email [eoconnell@ci.bloomington.mn.us](mailto:eoconnell@ci.bloomington.mn.us).

## Acknowledgments

We greatly appreciate the following people's willingness to share their perspectives and ideas about how to improve health and social integration of newcomers into our communities. Many of those interviewed are newcomers and we appreciate their stories and candid suggestions. Others have worked many years in schools and organizations and have learned much from their personal experiences and work with diverse populations.

- Shirley Barlett, Program Coordinator, Family Multicultural Resource Center/MIRA, Richfield
- Mary Jo Bayliss, Volunteer Coordinator, South Hennepin Adult Programs in Education (SHAPE)
- Andries Coatzee, Associate Pastor, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Bloomington
- Ruth Evanjalista, Program Coordinator of LaMison, Assumption Catholic Church, Richfield
- Chinda Gregor, Cultural Liaison, Educational Equity, Bloomington Public Schools
- Zara Guevara, Latino Cultural Liaison, Educational Equity, Bloomington Public Schools
- Warsame M. Hassan, African Outreach Worker, Hennepin County Libraries
- Ikram Ul Huq, Religious Leader, Muslim Community Center/Masjid ARr Rahman Bloomington
- Bibi S. Khoyratty, M.D., Minnesota Oncology Hematology & Medical Director of Rahma Clinic at Masjid ARr Rahman, Bloomington
- France Lubucke, Program Director, Volunteers Enlisted to Assist People (VEAP), Bloomington
- Mike McCawley, Family Services Coordinator, Fraser School
- Amin Mohammed, Supervisor, School Success/Immigrant Health, Storefront Group, Richfield
- Kristie O'Brien, E.S.L. Director, Richfield Public Schools
- Don Peterson, Manager, Comfort Inn, Bloomington
- Teresa Rosen, Assistant Senior High Principal, Richfield Public Schools
- Wynfred Russell, Director of Multicultural Services, Normandale Community College
- Mark Schoenhals, Associate Pastor, St. Luke's Church
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Special thanks to Amy Cowell, graduate student intern at the U of M School of Public Health, for her time and help in recruiting and interviewing community leaders and outreach workers. Thanks also to Eileen O'Connell, Denise Reese, Melissa Drews, Joan Bulfer, and Becky Fitch, (Bloomington Public Health) and Tracy Smith (Bloomington Human Services) for all their help on this project.

Report written by Rosalind Johnson and reviewed by Linda Riski-Lundeen and Amy Cowell, Bloomington Public Health.

## APPENDIX A

### 2008-09 Healthy Together Leadership Advisory Team Roster Bloomington Public Health

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