



Office of Refugee Resettlement Refugee Program Physical and Behavioral Health Promising Practice



International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis COVID-19 Information Dissemination

In March 2020, the International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis (IISTL) in Missouri identified the need to provide public health and related COVID-19 information to area refugees in their primary languages. Although some federal resources were available in multiple languages, state and local information was mainly offered in English and Spanish. To address this, IISTL repurposed their automated call system. Prior to the pandemic, the agency used the system internally to communicate the status of agency operations (e.g., delayed openings or closings due to inclement weather) to staff members and clients who call the agency's main number. Since the pandemic, IISTL has used the call system to communicate externally with refugees in eight different languages. Over time, IISTL's messages have become a trusted source of information for refugees.



Practice Description

IISTL sends automated phone messages containing local and state-level information related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The agency translated messages into eight languages and sent them to clients in their primary language.



Need for the Practice

Many refugees depend on their local media outlets for information related to the pandemic, such as COVID-19 treatment and services, the status of public schools, or updates regarding area businesses. Yet, local and state information was available in only English and Spanish and not in other client languages. Noticing this gap in communication, IISTL assessed their current resources to find an economical and effective way to address this issue.



How to Implement the Practice

IISTL described the following key steps to implement this practice:

- IISTL maintained a client database containing client data over the past eight years. The agency sorted client data by phone number and primary language to determine the top eight languages clients speak.
- IISTL verified the need for translated messages in the eight languages identified.
- IISTL met with its local and state government partners to develop a strategy to broaden messaging around public health and issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- IISTL contracted interpreters to develop and record the automated messages. (*Note: Over 22 messages have been translated and recorded in eight different languages.*)
- IISTL coordinated message delivery to clients in their respective primary language.



Preliminary Results

IISTL provided output data used to inform changes to and measure the effectiveness of this practice. Specific examples include:

- An increase in the number of people answering the call or listening to the message within the first 24 hours of receiving it. When this practice began, IISTL calculated 300 people who answered the call or listened to the message. However, over time, this number has increased to more than 700 people answering the call or listening to the message within 24 hours of receiving it.
- A decline in the response rate when they sent multiples messages in the same week indicated that the volume of messaging impacts the number of people who answer the call or listen to the voicemail. IISTL learned to be judicious when deciding on what messages to send and the timing of when to send them.

IISTL also experienced an unexpected outcome when they started receiving requests from other agencies to deliver messages using their automated system.



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.

- Accurate client contact information to which messages can be delivered.
- An automated calling system, or comparable mechanism, to broadcast messages to the target audience. IISTL's automated calling subscription includes data analytics and reports, which is key to knowing whether the system is delivering the messages and clients are accessing them. The cost to implement these systems will vary.
- The amount of time needed to draft and record messages will vary; agencies should note that it will take time to tailor messages that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for each language.
- Interpreters to translate and record messages into different languages. The cost to interpret and record messages will vary.



Contextual Considerations

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

- IISTL strategically engaged local and state partners in conversations about how to broaden the messaging on COVID-19 and public health. Although there were national materials available in various languages, IISTL focused on providing community updates and directives from executive offices at the city, county, and state levels. Having longstanding partnerships with local and state agencies facilitated their capacity to provide timely and up-to-date information to area refugees.
- Recognizing that refugees often prefer communicating by phone informed IISTL's decision to repurpose their automated call system. Having this knowledge enabled the agency to implement an immediate and cost-effective solution.

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.