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# Support Beyond the Welcome Mat

## Supporting Refugee Families With Young Children in Michigan

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In 2020, the Michigan Department of Education's (MDE's) Office of Great Start received federal continuation funds for the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) by the Administration for Children & Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. To further the state's goal to make Michigan the best state to raise a family, MDE launched a statewide needs assessment to understand the needs of families with young children that are currently unmet by the state's mixed delivery system. See the full needs assessment [report](#) for more information.

As part of the PDG needs assessment, MDE contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct focus groups to learn about the needs of refugee families with young children. In spring 2021, AIR and its partner, the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, conducted four focus groups to complete this needs assessment. One focus group comprised providers from a nonprofit agency providing resettlement services, and three focus groups comprised refugee families who provide home-based childcare to other refugee families in their communities. These families are from Burma, Iran, and the Republic of Congo. We asked the focus group participants about the experiences of refugee families with young children. Specifically, we asked how easy it is for refugee families to access programs and services for their children and if they had any barriers to accessing these programs and services. These questions focused on three areas: early childhood care and education (ECCE), early intervention (EI) and early childhood special education (ECSE), and medical care. These three services are key to Michigan's mixed delivery system and important to families with young children.

### Data Collection

To document the needs of refugee families in Michigan, the study team conducted four focus groups. Two refugee resettlement programs in Michigan volunteered to recruit participants. Three focus groups included 16 home-based childcare providers. Each childcare provider in a focus group also is a refugee who experienced the resettlement process with their family. A local resettlement service program trained these individuals to provide home-based childcare for fellow refugee families. Second, the study team conducted one

A refugee is a person who fled their home country because of persecution, or a well-founded fear of persecution related to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the most recent year for which data are available, 1,028 refugees resettled in Michigan.<sup>2</sup> Refugees most commonly came from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the majority settled in Kent County (46%), Washtenaw County (13%), or Wayne County (12%). The number of refugees resettled in Michigan decreased by 76% since 2016 because of the change in administration and stark shifts in refugee policies.

<sup>1</sup> Source. UNHCR. (n.d.). *What is resettlement?* <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement.html>

<sup>2</sup> Source. Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, Office of Global Michigan.

focus group with four resettlement staff<sup>3</sup> from a nonprofit organization that works directly with newly resettled families to help them access the resources they need to acclimate to their new home. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. AIR transcribed and analyzed all the transcripts from the focus groups. The analysis used an a priori coding structure focused on documenting needs in ECCE, EI and ECSE, and medical care.

## The Refugee Experience in Michigan

We heard consistently that refugee families are resilient, hardworking, and committed to success in their new home country. However, we also heard many unique needs and challenges that these families face in accessing services for their young children. Throughout this brief, it is critical to remember that refugee families are not a homogeneous group. Although the needs of refugee families may have some similarities, their histories, cultures, and preferences are very different.

When refugee families first arrive, they must navigate unfamiliar languages, social norms, and system processes to access basic services and resources. For example, newly resettled refugee families often need help obtaining identification documents, transportation, and employment. Resettlement services can help families navigate the resettlement process by helping them find important services and resources. However, the support provided to refugee families by resettlement services is limited. For example, funding provided by the U.S. State Department to resettlement agencies is limited to supporting families for the first 90 days of resettlement. The refugee childcare providers we spoke with (who themselves are refugee families and experienced what it is like to resettle in Michigan firsthand) indicated that when resettlement services are unavailable or no longer available, it is the local refugee community that helps families access services and resources.

“As a refugee, there are so many challenges because the culture is totally different, and you are in a new area. You’re catching up with the world. You are learning a lot of things. I mean, you are in a new culture, so it’s really hard and challenging.” –*Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

“If they’re newly arrived, they can’t do it alone. They will need some sort of guidance and, eventually, once they see the process, then they are able to access the resources they need. But they need us for that initial connection to those services.” –*Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

“We are a resettlement agency and in addition we have support services after they’re resettled. So, we resettle them [refugee families]; that program is 90 days, and after the 90 days they go into one of the support programs. If they didn’t get resettled by us, maybe moved from Dearborn [Michigan] or moved from California, they access services through word of mouth. They’ll move into an area and maybe they’ll go to a mosque and say, ‘We just moved here,’ and those people will say, ‘You should contact [resettlement agency].’ So those families depend on word of mouth and referral from their community.” –*Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

**Finding and enrolling in early childhood care and education programs can be challenging for refugee families.** A key concern for many Michigan families is how to access quality ECCE programs for their young children, including both childcare for infants and toddlers and preschool programs. Much like other families in Michigan, refugee families differ in their choices for early care; many families prefer that their children stay home with a parent until they start preschool, whereas other families prefer or need to start their child in childcare at a younger age. Alternately, participants discussed several reasons why families decide to enroll their children in more formal, center-based ECCE programs, including giving their children an opportunity to learn English, staying developmentally on track for kindergarten, developing their social and emotional skills, and learning cultural norms and boundaries by engaging with other children. The following section discusses the availability of ECCE programs for refugee families and the barriers that refugee families reportedly experience when accessing ECCE programs, along with some ways in which resettlement programs support refugee families and their local community.

<sup>3</sup> Refugee resettlement staff included caseworkers and a supervisor.

**Infant and toddler childcare is largely available to refugee families, and resettlement staff help families navigate the childcare options and enrollment process in Michigan.** According to the focus group participants, childcare for infants and toddlers is largely accessible to refugee families. However, that accessibility depends on the support that families receive from resettlement program services and the refugee community. Refugee resettlement program staff shared that they help families both find and enroll children in care. Families need this assistance because they often need information on where to find childcare for young children, the correct ages for enrollment, how to enroll their children, and how to access and apply for financial support (such as applying for the state’s childcare subsidy program). Thus, for some families, the largest barrier to accessing infant and toddler childcare can be a lack of access to the support and resources provided by the established refugee community and refugee resettlement programs.

“ [Refugee families] don’t know how to [access childcare] without our support. They don’t know how much childcare costs, what age [children] qualify for childcare. . . . I wouldn’t say that [childcare] isn’t accessible to them; they just don’t have the knowledge of the process of accessing it.” –*Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

**Language considerations are important for refugee families and are a part of infant/toddler childcare choices.** Refugee families often consider the language spoken in a childcare environment when selecting a program for their infant or toddler. Some families prefer that their children are in an English-only environment, believing that early fluency will benefit their child moving forward. Other families prefer that their children are in an environment with their home language, believing that it is important for the child to develop and maintain that language.

“ Currently, I’m taking care of some children, and they’ve just come to this country about 7 months ago, and they’ve already begun to forget simple words like ‘Come.’ Unless I say it in English, the children don’t understand. We have to make our native languages very, very important and stronger because English is something they will learn anywhere and everywhere.” –*Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

“ Most clients want their child to start learning English as early as possible because learning languages is easier for children than for adults. We’ve had children who have come to the United States and learn English within 6 months.” –*Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

**Refugee families need support in enrolling their children in preschool.** Newly resettled refugee families also may need help in finding and enrolling in preschool programs. Refugee childcare providers and resettlement program staff reported that they help families identify the preschool program that is right for them. However, as is common for many families in Michigan, refugee families trying to enroll children in local publicly funded preschool programs, such as Head Start or the Great Start Readiness Program, discover that the programs have a wait-list. (Note: In some locations, these wait-lists have lessened because of reduced numbers of refugees entering the country in recent years.) When slots become available, families receive assistance (e.g., translation services) to complete the enrollment process from resettlement service programs staff and individuals from their community, such as the refugee family childcare providers we spoke with.

“ We do have a [list of preschools]. We show that to them, and I literally tell them, like, ‘If you need any help, I’ll be here. I’ll translate for you.’” –*Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

“ . . . for our local free preschool or Head Start program, there’s often a wait-list. We’ve had clients wait a couple of months, even up to a year, to get into the program. But in the past we’ve had a lot of refugees; unfortunately with the administration change, there have been less. So lately there are some more openings in our area.” –*Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

**Refugee families need ECCE providers that they trust, are empathetic to the refugee experience, and are sensitive to their culture.** Like other Michigan families, refugee families consider quality ECCE programs to be those in which they feel welcome, in which their child is loved and well cared for, and that are sensitive to a child’s needs and their family’s culture. The refugee childcare providers we spoke with conveyed that when these qualities are in place, childcare providers can build trust with refugee families. This trust increases by having empathy for the refugee experience. It also is

important for childcare providers to be aware of and sensitive to a refugee family's distinct cultural practices. To ensure that this occurs for families, resettlement program staff reported partnering with ECCE providers to share important information about a family's cultural or special religious practices.

“It takes trust for parents to send their children to school. . . . And I know that when children can't communicate well [because they are young or because they don't speak the same language], it's hard. [Parents] worry.” *-Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

## What do refugee families need to access early intervention and early childhood special education services?

As with many other Michigan families, newly resettled refugee families find enrolling in EI and ECSE services challenging. These families experience challenges both concretely, through language and transportation barriers, and culturally, through disability stigma. Many of the challenges that families face when accessing childcare and preschool education also are present when accessing EI and ECSE services for their young children. More importantly, the lack of access to EI services may have more severe consequences for refugee families than for nonrefugee families in Michigan because their children often experienced trauma in their home countries, which, if left unaddressed, can pose challenges for their children's healthy development.

**Refugee families face several barriers to accessing early intervention and special education services, such as language barriers and transportation.** Refugee childcare providers identified several challenges that families in their community experience when accessing EI and ECSE services. First, families may struggle to enroll their child in services if the adults in the family have limited English literacy. If enrollment paperwork is not available in their language, it is challenging to navigate the enrollment process. Although not unique to refugee families, the focus group participants also mentioned transportation barriers as a key challenge in accessing services once children are enrolled.

“The biggest barrier to getting this child special education services was language.” *-Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

“Sometimes the parents don't have the car needed to get to services, or the mother can't drive.” *-Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

**Refugee families may have to overcome cultural differences in views on what is typical child development or increased stigma associated with disability.** The focus group participants also discussed cultural differences about child development that they experience when serving refugee families. Cultural differences exist regarding concepts of child development and delay as well as the stigma of disability. These cultural differences may cause refugee families to hesitate in enrolling their children in ECSE and related intervention services.

“. . . when it comes to development, child development in many communities is not really an issue unless a child has gone 3 years without talking or 1.5 years without walking. Those are the things that [some cultures] consider developmental issues, but anything like what we consider to be a problem with development, many cultures don't believe in that.” *-Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

“There's always a lack of knowledge because sometimes a child is born normal, I mean, as far as the parent is concerned; they don't understand otherwise. And things get lost in translation; you try to explain [delay or disability] and then it's translated in a different way. So that means that sometimes both parents see or understand something differently than what you've explained to them. And there is also the challenges that the parents are facing: They've just arrived in a new country, [and] they are trying to grasp [their new life] and to understand what they're supposed to be doing is difficult. So, lack of knowledge is the main barrier, but there's also the barrier of the challenges that the parents face when they first come into the U.S.” *-Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

**Refugee childcare providers play an important role in informing and supporting families through the early intervention and early childhood special education enrollment process.** Refugee childcare providers reported that they can provide a range of supports to help families in their community access EI and ECSE services. Refugee childcare providers encourage families to visit their child’s pediatrician and comply with the services offered. In addition, refugee childcare providers maintain a list of EI and ECSE providers to help families access services. More concretely, providers also help families sign up for services and complete intake, especially if there are language barriers to overcome. Refugee childcare providers further mentioned that when parents express misgivings about pursuing services, they do their best to explain the benefits of those services and discuss with families any concerns they may have.

**Limited screening practices may act as a barrier to the early identification of delays and disability in children from refugee families.** Refugee resettlement staff confirmed that many refugee families hesitate to pursue EI and ECSE services. These staff also reported, however, that they rarely make referrals to EI or ECSE. When they have attempted to secure services for children with delays, they reported that it was a challenge. A staff member wondered if delays and disabilities may go undetected within refugee families because children are not referred for screening as often as they should be. And perhaps those referrals did not occur because providers dismiss the delays as related to second language learning or possible trauma experienced by refugee families.

“ I don’t know if the refugee children get screened for possible disabilities or learning delays. The only reason why I say that is because I’ve been with [agency] for 5 years, and we’ve had one that I can remember. So, I’m just curious to know if that’s because we just haven’t had clients that have had any delays or learning disabilities or they’re not being screened for anything because of the language barrier, or people assuming language delays are related to that language barrier because they don’t speak English. Or because they’re a refugee, and they’ve experienced trauma. So, we’ve wondered if delays are present but are being hidden because of other circumstances.” –*Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

## What are the needs of refugee families to access medical services?

Accessing medical care—and the insurance needed to make it affordable—is a problem for many Michigan families. Newly resettled refugee families struggle as well. However, those families supported by refugee resettlement services experience fewer initial accessibility challenges.

**Refugee families face several barriers to accessing medical services, such as transportation and medical insurance challenges; however, families receiving resettlement services have several supports to overcome these barriers.**

According to the focus group participants, transportation and insurance are the most common barriers to accessing medical care for refugee families. For many families, refugee resettlement services work closely within their first 90 days to improve families’ initial access to health care by offering transportation support, providing health screening on arrival, connecting families to supportive primary care providers, and helping families manage their children’s immunization schedules with local schools. In addition, refugee childcare providers, as part of the refugee community, reported that they have helped families individually complete the complicated process of Medicaid enrollment. Unfortunately, these supports do not reach everyone, and some refugee families struggle to access medical insurance. As a result, these families may avoid needed medical care or experience a trip to the emergency room turning into a financial crisis.

Participants also stressed that culture influences families’ decisions for accessing health care. For example, resettlement staff said that many families hold a stigma regarding mental illness and accessing mental health services. Because of this stigma, resettlement program staff said they are thoughtful about how they ask families about mental health–related subjects and recognize that families may need more information before pursuing mental health–related services.

“If the school contacts us and says, ‘This client is late on these immunizations; can you help them make an appointment?’ We talk to the family. We say, ‘This child needs immunizations; we’re going to schedule an appointment for the child and yourself to go.’ And we coordinate the care with the doctor’s office. The same with the dental office as well.” –*Refugee Resettlement Program Staff*

“For some parents, they don’t have Medicaid, so when they go to the emergency room, their bill is 3,000, 4,000 [dollars]. So, it is really difficult for them. So that kind of family [without health insurance], they don’t go to the doctor when someone is sick.” –*Refugee Family Childcare Provider*

## Conclusion

Throughout the Michigan PDG Needs Assessment activities, we heard that families with young children do not have adequate guidance or clarity on how to navigate Michigan’s mixed delivery system. Finding necessary services via Michigan’s mixed delivery system can be challenging for all kinds of families, from Michigan natives who speak fluent English to families who are entirely new to the United States and are still learning English. Although we heard from all focus groups that refugee families are resilient, hardworking, and committed to success in their new home country, it can be nearly impossible for these families to successfully access necessary services without the initial support of intensive resettlement program services and their local community of established refugees. Initial resettlement program services for new refugees and the presence of a local community of established refugees play an important part in helping families navigate new or confusing systems, find what they need, and lend a hand when language barriers get in the way. It is important to note, however, that initial resettlement services offered by local services agencies are very time limited. Many families may benefit from ongoing support, especially when support is not available to them in the form of a local refugee community.

It is critical to also remember that refugee families are not a homogeneous group. Although the needs of refugee families may have some similarities, their histories, cultures, and preferences are very different. Thus, the provision of translation services and translated documents is key to giving families options and providing inclusive access to the types of services and resources preferred by each family. We are grateful to the refugee childcare providers and refugee resettlement program staff who provided us with their time and their wisdom.



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