



Building Community Partnerships to Serve Refugee Youth in Indianapolis

WHAT IS THE RHYME PROGRAM?

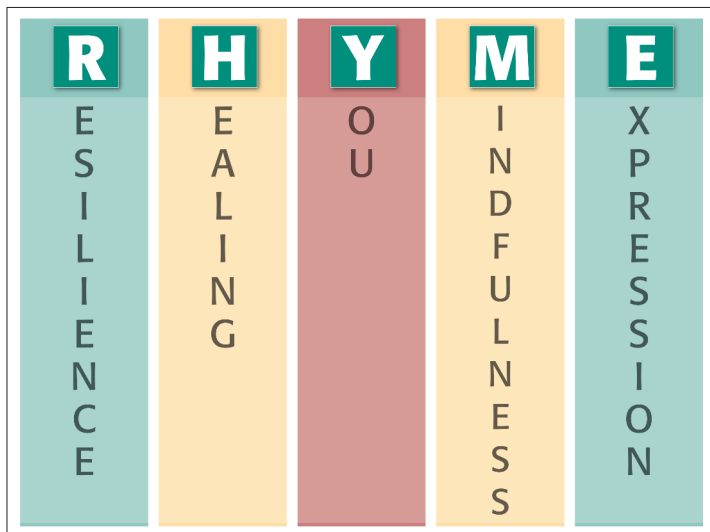
In 2017, the IU Public Policy Institute partnered with the Immigrant Welcome Center and several IUPUI schools and offices to develop the multidisciplinary RHYME refugee youth mentoring program. RHYME—which stands for Resilience, Healing, You, Mindfulness, Expression—addresses the needs of refugee youth and their families living in the Indianapolis area. Broadly, the RHYME curriculum is designed to help students build the skills and connections necessary to thrive in their new community and to envision a path to college after completing high school.

Primary RHYME program goals:

- Assist refugee teens in building resiliency, problem-solving, and communication skills
- Provide opportunities for refugee teens to build connections and positive experiences in the Indianapolis community

Through PPI's collaboration with the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Fairbanks School of Public Health, Office of Community Engagement, Herron School of Art and Design, and the Division of Student Affairs' Office of the Campus Center and Student Experiences, and the Immigrant Welcome Center, the RHYME team implemented a year-long program that began with an intensive week-long summer camp at IUPUI in July 2017. This program built upon the strong framework of the well-established Your Life Your Story (YLYS), annual Latino Youth Summit led by Dr. Silvia Bigatti from the Fairbanks School of Public Health.

The RHYME program is supported in part by the IUPUI Welcoming Campus Innovation Fund and advances the goals of IUPUI's Welcoming Campus Initiative. RHYME project leaders were selected as Welcoming Campus Innovators during the inaugural round of funding.



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BACKGROUND ON REFUGEE FAMILIES SERVED BY RHYME

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

RHYME program participants came from a variety of countries of origin that have experienced conflict. These include Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, and Syria. A number of participants lived in refugee camps in other countries (e.g., Tanzania) prior to U.S. resettlement.

REFUGEE FAMILY CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

Fleeing their countries of origin and living in refugee camps, sometimes for several years, the youth participating in the program were likely exposed to trauma, a lack of educational opportunities, and other risks factors that contribute to poor mental and physical health and impact development. Once resettled in the U.S. and Indianapolis, low parental English proficiency makes it difficult for refugee parents to enter and thrive in the U.S. work force. Language barriers also pose challenges to supporting their children's education and in seeking needed social services such as housing assistance, job training, and food subsidies.

More specifically, RHYME partners report refugee youth and their families need assistance with:

- English proficiency, including adult English classes, summer tutoring for youth
- Integration into U.S. culture
- Youth access and exposure to the city and fun activities. Many spend little or no time away from school or apartment complexes, except for shopping and attending religious services



RHYME ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

ACTIVITIES

Summer Camp

The inaugural RHYME summer camp included refugee teens attending Indianapolis Public Schools, and other metropolitan school districts in Perry, Washington, and Wayne townships. During camp week, high school students participated in a program modeled after the YLYS Latino youth program. Our activity leaders and mentors assisted teens in building resiliency, problem-solving, and communication skills through a series of fun, team-building, and creative expression activities. Campers also learned their way around the IUPUI campus including Hine Hall, the Campus Center, and Cavanaugh Hall.

PPI's university and community partners, camp activity leaders, and student mentors provided invaluable assistance in recruiting camp participants, communicating details to parents, arranging bus transportation to and from camp for campers, and providing language assistance during camp week.

Fall Event

A number of RHYME summer camp participants expressed interest in learning more about IUPUI and the college application process. Program directors invited campers and their families to a RHYME on-campus reunion event on October 29, 2017. At this event, staff from IUPUI's Offices of Community Engagement, Undergraduate Admissions, International Affairs, and O'Neill's Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Tamra Wright, gave presentations on academic programs, as well as the application, admissions, and financial aid processes. The IU Office of Admissions provided an application fee waiver code for RHYME participants. RHYME directors and student mentors from IUPUI showed RHYME participants around the Campus Center and University Library and then attended the Indy Eleven soccer game.



OUTCOMES

RHYME participants formed strong connections with program directors, mentors and activity leaders, as well as strengthening their relationships with peers from neighboring school districts. Additionally, participating IUPUI staff and faculty established strong connections with valuable community partners. Partner feedback suggests great potential exists for future collaborations on meaningful projects focused on outreach to refugees and other diverse, multicultural communities in Central Indiana.

RHYME participant and parent feedback

Participant surveys administered at the end of camp found that most campers were very positive about their camp experience. Campers identified camp group activities, bonding with peers and student mentors, and touring campus as elements they valued most from their RHYME experience. Anecdotally, at the end of camp week, one participant asked a program director if he could come back next year and suggested the camp should last for two weeks instead of one. Nearly



all camp participants returned for the fall event. Many brought friends who were also interested in learning more about IUPUI and participating in program activities. A number of parents also attended and expressed appreciation for the experiences provided to their children. They asked questions about the college application process and requested more events be planned to include parents and younger siblings.

At the end of camp week, one participant asked a program director if he can come back next year and suggested the camp should last for two weeks instead of one.

Mentor feedback

As expressed in the RHYME program video, student mentors reported gaining a great deal from their work with refugee youth including a better understanding of and empathy for the experiences of refugees. Mentors also reported developing multicultural sensitivity, as well as essential leadership and communication skills. Two RHYME student mentors went on to apply to an overseas fellowship program and the Peace Corps.

Partner feedback

Community and university partners conveyed that the RHYME program assisted in “educating and equipping students as they navigate life in the U.S.” They also indicated the program helped enable participants to become familiar with a college campus and to consider college as a realistic option after high school. The majority of community partners expressed interest in partnering with the RHYME program in the future.

CHALLENGES

RHYME program directors faced a number of challenges that would need to be addressed in the near future. As with most upstart programs, the most pressing challenge is securing long-term funding to sustain the RHYME program. The logistics of sustaining the RHYME program long term will be somewhat complicated. Developing, implementing, and managing the RHYME program requires collaboration with a number of departments, agencies, and organizations, both inside and outside of Indiana University. Additionally, the refugee population has its own set of challenges that must be addressed, including language and transportation barriers.

Community partner organizations communicated the biggest challenge to their participation is the need to provide transportation for refugee youth to attend the summer camp. Given their limited resources, RHYME community partners stated planning ahead was critical to (1) securing necessary translation services to address parent and youth language barriers, (2) allocating transportation resources, and (3) determining transportation logistics. It is important to address these issues as early as possible during the planning process in order to maximize participation and attendance, and to maintain and

strengthen youth and family connections with the university over time. If funding is secured to continue the RHYME program, partners conveyed that the program should focus on the following:

- Information regarding how high school performance can impact college options
- Employment and career information related to different college programs and degrees (e.g., Ivy Tech and ability to transfer credits to IUPUI)
- Discussions regarding making healthy life choices

“ I am most proud that we were able to create an environment where directors, activity leaders, student mentors, and camp participants were able to share and learn from each other.”

— Dona Sapp, RHYME Program Director

FUTURE PLANS

Overall, the opportunity provided by the Welcoming Campus Initiative to develop the RHYME program was both rewarding and promising. While it was initially challenging, RHYME program directors were able to identify and connect with strong community partners who were not only committed to serving the refugee community, but also eager to collaborate with others who share this commitment. Team leaders will now work to identify ways to leverage the strong foundation built during the first year in order to secure long-term funding and continue the important work of the RHYME program.

WHAT ROLE CAN THE RHYME PROGRAM AND THE UNIVERSITY PLAY IN SERVING THE REFUGEE COMMUNITY?

Consistent with the themes and goals of the Welcoming Campus Initiative, as well as the IUPUI and O’Neill commitment to community service, future RHYME program activities should focus on:

- Fostering communication and strengthen collaboration between community organizations (nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and local K-12 school districts) with shared goals of service to the Indianapolis refugee community
- Providing assistance to refugee youth with college planning, completing college applications, and identifying potential sources of financial aid
- Hosting university events and recreational outings that will enable refugee families to meet new people and form connections, while experiencing some of the many assets offered in the Indianapolis community (e.g., parks, museums, sporting events, etc.)

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ABOUT IUPUI’S WELCOMING CAMPUS INITIATIVE

IUPUI Chancellor Nasser Paydar announced the \$1 million Welcoming Campus Innovation Fund in his 2016 State of the Campus Address. This fund provides internal grants of up to \$25,000—with a match by the proposing unit—to support implementation of recommendations emerging from the Welcoming Campus Initiative, specifically related to these overarching themes:

- Communicating who we are
- Creating a vibrant and inclusive student experience
- Designing an accessible, inspiring urban campus
- Engaging and integrating with the community
- Investing in faculty and staff

The fund is designed to support collaborative, sustainable projects proposed by IUPUI faculty, staff, and students that help

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An electronic copy of this document can be accessed via the PPI website (<https://policyinstitute.iu.edu>).



RHYME REFUGEE YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAM

The RHYME program is supported in part by the IUPUI Welcoming Campus Innovation Fund and advances the goals of IUPUI’s Welcoming Campus Initiative welcoming.iupui.edu

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Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health
IUPUI Office of Community Engagement
IUPUI Division of Student Affairs (Office of the Campus Center and Student Experiences)
Herron School of Art and Design
Immigrant Welcome Center

We would also like to thank the following community organizations for their assistance in planning RHYME program activities:

Indianapolis Public Schools, Newcomer Program
M.S.D. of Perry Township
M.S.D. of Washington Township
Catholic Charities, Refugee and Immigrant Services
Exodus Refugee
Wesley United Methodist Church, Refugee Faith Care Team

Our camp activity leaders:

Macy Ballard, Theatre activity leader
Paco Espinosa, Sports and physical activity leader
Heidi Fledderjohn, Yoga activity leader
Patricia Garcia, Resilience building activity leader
Youngbok Hong, Art activity leader
Raul Padro, Music activity leader
Mario Salinas, Resilience building activity leader
Robert Sander, Storytelling activity leader
Charlotte Uwimbabazi, Bilingual Assistant, IPS Newcomer Program

Our student mentors:

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Aishat Sadiq

And our filmmakers:

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